

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO WORK WITH A GUIDE DOG?

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Seven veteran guide dog handlers compare their experiences with 36 guide dogs representing six breeds, Labrador retriever, golden retriever, German shepherd, Australian shepherd, Airedale, and flat-coated retriever; two hybrids, poodle-Lab and Lab-golden; two Lab mixes; and one border collie mix.

Although German shepherds, Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers are the most familiar guide dog breeds, any confident, friendly, intelligent and willing dog, large enough for the harness but small enough to lie comfortably under a bus seat, is eligible. Boxers, smooth coated collies, poodles, Dobermans, border collies and Australian shepherds are increasingly finding employment as guides, as are their more genetically sound hybrid offspring.

Many are called: about 2,500 pups are whelped annually at guide dogs schools. But relatively few of them — less than half — are chosen.

The work is rigorous and uncompromising. Breed differences aside, dogs selected to be trained as guides all have one thing in common: an innate confidence that nurtures their unusual ability to solve problems in stressful situations without consistent positive reinforcement. Not just simple rote-learners, guide dogs have to be able to recognize what one situation has in common with another and react accordingly; they have to perform spectacular feats of *disobedience*; and they usually have to do it all without reinforcement because their handlers, nine times out of ten, don't know what it is they've done.

"Because we can't see, we don't know the particulars of what we're commanding our dogs to do," explains one blind handler, a Columbus, Ohio, radio technician. "The dog has to stand up to us, to get it through to us that something is there that we don't know about, then find a way to get us out of a dangerous situation. A dog that isn't comfortable holding his ground isn't suited to the job."

Some blind handlers argue that there are marked differences in each breed's approach to guide work, while others think that the traits that make good guides neutralize the larger behaviors that characterize each breed. Some report that shepherds walk with smooth determination, whereas labs have a wiggle in their walk. One handler described her golden retriever guides as elegant and graceful. Another guide dog user, an employee of Seeing Eye, has worked with a German shepherd for 10 years, a lab for seven, two different golden retrievers for 15 years, and now has two years' experience under his belt working with a golden-lab cross. He says that there are some physical characteristics that are different among breeds, such as the gait and how the dog feels through the harness.

"Even so," the handler says, "The dog's unique personality, combined with the person's — how they work together and what they expect of each other — that's where the differences are."

Watching blind travelers confidently make their way through busy city traffic, you might assume that the dog is leading the person. But the cornerstone of the work is that the dog, trained to judge the speed and distance of moving vehicles, will if necessary disobey the human partner's command, and signal through the rigid harness that it's unsafe to go forward. The handler not only directs the dog, but supports her decisions, even when the animal disobeys.

"It's a 50-50 relationship," says a handler who's worked with one lab, two mixed-breed labs and two golden retrievers, and now is partnered with a lab-poodle cross. "Neither one of us is in total control at any given time. Both of our lives depend on what the other one does. Neither of us may be able to make a safe street crossing alone, but together we do it gracefully."

Taught to allow for the person's height and width, the dog can make a decision to walk around or under obstacles, or stop to ask for input as if to say, "Here is an overturned garbage can. Which way would you like to go?" In addition, dogs learn to safely maneuver stairs, elevators, escalators and public transportation.

“How my dogs dealt with obstacles isn’t, in my opinion, a function of breed-specific differences,” says a seasoned 25-year guide dog user from Kansas City, MO, who has partnered with an Airedale, a border collie mix, an Australian shepherd and, briefly, a Siberian husky. “My Airedale, as I recall him, was quick to generalize about the concept “obstacle” but wasn’t particularly good at scoping out his environment and making decisions in advance.”

The Aussie and the border collie mix, which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers procurement analyst affectionately describes as a “BC-fence jumper hybrid,” seemed to generalize quickly.

“The border collie mix had very high head carriage and was by far the very best dog I’ve worked when it came to overhead hazards,” he said. “The Aussie has been harder to teach naturally occurring overheads like tree limbs, but whether that’s a breed thing or a result of their tendency to work with their heads a little low, I’m not sure.”

Another woman who volunteers at a number of non-profits that require travel and public speaking, has worked with two shepherd guides and one lab-golden cross.

“In my opinion, you might say that the retrievers’ style provides more information about the specifics of the environment, but the shepherds’ style makes for more efficient travel,” she explains. “My shepherds, in comparison to my retriever, both typically looked farther ahead as they guided,” she says. “They corrected for upcoming obstacles from a distance and our travel path was typically a smooth line. Sudden turns or stops happened only in response to an obstacle that unexpectedly crossed our intended path.”

“My retriever cross clearly does not take the same approach. In general, this dog will stop and show me the obstacle, and he will almost always seek prompting from me on which way to go next.”

Another typical difference between dogs, explains a blind employee who works at Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael, CA, is their approach to routes.

“Personally I find that my retrievers enjoyed familiar routes. In comparison, my shepherd gets bored with routine, so you have to get creative with routes and mix things up,” she says.

She adds that retrievers are looking to please the handler, as if asking, “Did I do what you wanted, am I making you happy?” whereas her shepherds have been motivated by doing the job and solving the problems.

“With shepherds, it’s not so much about what pleases me as it is about pleasing themselves,” she says.

A guide dog handler who operates a gift shop in Colorado Springs, CO, has worked with three Labs, a Lab mix, a golden retriever and a shepherd. “If I were to generalize,” she says, “I’d say my Labs often worked up to an obstacle before deciding what to do about it, while my shepherd would decide in advance what to do, perhaps starting the turn more gradually as we approached the barrier. My golden would stop to show me before trying to work it out.”

Eight guide dogs and 34 years later, a handler from Auburn, ME, contemplated her experiences with four Labs, two goldens, one shepherd, and one flat-coat retriever.

“My flat-coat, Wicket, solved problems by coming to a full stop,” she says. “Sometimes he would just stand there and I could feel his head moving. People said that he looked like he was weighing all the possibilities. Then he would make his decision. And in nine years of partnership he never made a mistake.”

A guide dog handler for 17 years, one woman got her first German shepherd in 1996 after working with three Labs. She says she had to learn the body language that was unique to the shepherd. “At first I thought when my shepherd would insist on going a certain way and I wanted to go another that she was being stubborn or willful. I soon discovered that if I acknowledged her for what she was showing me, and then asked her to go the direction I wanted to go, she was totally fine with that. My second shepherd is the same way.”

There are legitimate reasons why someone might prefer one breed to another. Walking briskly through the city with a decisive German shepherd, breezing by hazards you don't know are there, doesn't appeal to every blind traveler, nor is every guide dog candidate capable of handling a shepherd. Yet, the shepherd is the breed many people prefer. Although incoming students may state breed preferences, the final match, like a pre-arranged marriage, is made by the instructors. Only 10 percent of the approximately 10,000 to 12,000 guide dogs working in the United States are shepherds, due in large part to the high incidence of unsuitable temperament and health issues in the breed.

"The shortage of German shepherds at most of the schools means I'll either have to switch schools to have any real hope of working with another shepherd or focus on the positive aspects of a retriever as a guide," one handler lamented.

Regardless of genealogy, each dog takes a unique approach to problem solving.

"I noticed that Logan, the Aussie I'm working with now, had a very strong preference for traveling on one or another side of a street when we walked home from work," explained his handler. "Eventually, I figured out the preference stemmed from whether it was or had recently been raining. One side of the street was commercial, the other had lots of trees with branches that hung low when wet." Dogs are expected to stop for hazardous overhanging obstacles, hence Logan's broad-brush approach to the problem: when it rains, it's more efficient to walk on the commercial side of the street.

"None of my dogs would miss head-height, man-made obstacles like scaffolding, metal stairs and sagging awnings, but sometimes they'd miss the natural ones such as tree limbs," added another handler. "My goldens were much more attuned to my reactions to things. If I did hit a branch, I needed only to flinch and they both acted as if they had been corrected. I would describe my Labrador as being solid, but she had the attitude that things would move for her or she would move them. She was careful, generally, but also had no compunction about moving me through some tight gaps. It wasn't always pretty, but she would get you where you needed to go safely and with enthusiasm."

Person and dog work as a team, each contributing to a relationship built on trust that begins during class, then deepens and broadens over time. Says a guide dog user with 35 years of experience, "I think developing trust is incumbent on the person. That's who sets the tone of the partnership so that the dog learns to be, in essence, not just a guide, but responsible for the person's safety."

When he was in class getting his second dog, they were traveling on a sidewalk parallel to a department store wall when someone exited the building. The dog, seeing the opened door, assumed that they were going in. But the door wasn't open wide enough and hit the man square on the forehead.

"My instructor reported that the look on the dog's face was, 'Oh my!! I did that!' From that point forward, the dog shifted his focus on how he guided me, with a greater degree of attention to my commands and voice tone. In fact, he was so responsive, for the remainder of our 10 years together, I may have given him all of 10 leash corrections."

"We learn our dog's reactions during training, so once I have it figured out, I just trust the dog's reading of the situation and act accordingly," says a woman who has traveled with guides since 1968. "My assumption is that my dog is acting to keep us safe until he proves to be distracted or is putting his agenda ahead of mine. Sure, if that sudden plunge proves to be because my Lab, Gentry, dove for a French fry, the appropriate correction needs to be made. Extra work to minimize that behavior may be called for, but 'follow your dog' has to be the first response if we are going to learn to trust and read each other. My safety depends on my ability to read their reactions and go with it and figure out the 'whys' later."

"Working a guide dog is like dancing," she explains. "And being responsive to my partner's moves is how it works best for me. Gentry and Phoebe were both large black Labs with a lot of initiative. They seldom asked for my input, made quick swift movements and expected I would be able to keep up and go with them. They were more likely to try to interpose their bodies between me and muscle me out of the way or into safety. Teddy, my golden, and my small Labrador retriever, Irish, were likely to be cautious and refuse to leave the curb until they determined that a car they watched was not going to move toward us."

However elaborate an argument we can make for or against breed differences, the flip side is that guide dogs are to great extent bred for a personality that makes them more like each other than they are to others of their breed. They may look different, but they've been bred and selected by guide dog schools to be friendly, loyal and loving, with a desire to serve and please.

"They have a profound sense of responsibility," says an experienced handler. "The thing all my dogs have had in common is good disposition, a willingness to do what I asked or required. And they all lacked what I call 'volatility.' None was fearful or shy, and though my Aussie started out being extraordinarily aloof, they've all been able to accept things like having strangers hanging their legs over them in planes or on buses with good grace."

"I'd also contend my dogs have all had a high degree of work ethic," he adds. "Delighted to stop whatever they might be doing to hop into a harness as soon as they've noticed me holding it out, none has ever shut down on me despite having to work in some very challenging situations."

One man described all his dogs as having been keen observers.

"They've all had similar complex personalities," he says. "They enjoyed their work and have been more than willing to guide and do things such as squeeze into small spaces and stay for hours, only because I have asked them to."

A thirty year guide dog veteran says she's owned dogs as pets, but that her relationship with the half-dozen guide dogs she's worked with was different.

"All of my guide dogs seemed to own me rather than the other way around."

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