



# The Guide to Guide Dogs

## More than a leash: Meet the animals who lead lives forward

They are friendly, cozy, and loving, and yet, they are best left ignored by you – guide dogs. Here at the Ski for Light International 2026 event, there are approximately 30 guide dogs, each guiding one skier, although they do not go on the trails with the skiers. There are volunteers who walk the dogs frequently during skiing time, but other than that short break, the guide dogs are just as much a part of the SFL community as the guides, skier, staff, etc., are. After spending some time at this event, and as a dog lover myself, I wanted to learn more about the ins and outs of the guide dog process... here is what I found.

# DOG BREEDS

With there being over 340 dog breeds in the world, depending on the kennel club to which is being referred to, a shocking six to eight are most commonly used worldwide as guide dogs. The most popular are Labrador Retriever, Golden Retriever, and German Shepard. This means that essentially only two to three percent of breeds are routinely suitable for guide work.



*Photo from Pinterest*

## Golden Retriever

The “America’s Sweetheart” in dog form is the Golden Retriever. From puppy to full-grown, this breed is one of the most eager to please, making them highly loyal and obedient to whoever spends the most time with them. Goldens are the most recognizable breed which decreases fear of size, personality, and risk of trepidation in public while on the job. They will love you as much or even more than you love them. As adorable and friendly as they are, they are still a guide dog and constantly working so it is still vital not to pet them.



*Photo from Pinterest*

## Labrador Retriever

It is not difficult to understand why they are the most common dog breed used as guide dogs. Apart from their genetic information coding adorable features, it also codes their larger physical size and strength, and loyal, obedient, high work ethic personalities. They were once bred as hunting dogs, further increasing intelligence and calmness in high-stress situations, and encoding the hardworking dogs that they are. They are extremely personable and rarely cause public problems. Along with this, there is no shortage of this breed in the world, making them some of the easiest dogs to obtain and train.



*Photo from Pinterest*

## German Shepards

As one of the most versatile working dog breeds in the world, there should be no surprise that German Shepards are frequently used for guiding. In fact, some consider them to be the ideal guiding dog depending on personal preferences. They have such high intuition, intelligence, companionship, and athleticism, that the training process is made much easier than other breeds. Unfortunately, due to their large size and powerful demeanor, German Shepards are not ideal for every individual, but the proper care, handler, and trainer truly does make all the difference.

**RESPECT**

**PARTNERSHIP**

**STRENGTH**

**COMPANION**

# ESTIMATED BREEDING VALUE

With there being so many breeds, a large question that frequently arises is how breeds are “chosen” or “selected” to be the more ideal guide dogs. There are many circumstantial answers that will be detailed later, but logically it boils down to one aspect. Estimated breeding value, or EBV, is a calculation related to specifically animals that predicts the merit for a given trait. For guide dogs, this is not a calculation of exact traits that are already apparent, but instead a measurement identifying which breeds are the most likely to successfully transmit desirable traits. This is typically calculated by not one dog, but relatives as well, allowing breeders to make decisions genetically and training-wise that can result in real generational changes in behavior.

This repeated phrase “desirable traits” includes stable temperament, high biddability, impulse control, physical structure, and sociability not excitability, to name just a few. This essentially means that guide dogs are not selected purely from intelligence or trainability, but the reliability of ideal traits to be passed through generations – the traits listed above. Calm, emotionally stable temperaments are a must for allowing the dogs to remain unfazed by loud, sudden noise and distractions. Biddability, which influences the natural ability to work closely with and learn from humans, increases low-stress guiding. There is an overwhelming favor of Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers due to the long shaped cooperative abilities to work alongside people.

Thus far, the traits discussed have been innate but one critical trait that is not innate yet must be carefully taught is intelligent disobedience. This skill teaches a guide dog to intentionally refuse a command when the action that follows would place the handler in danger. For example, ignoring the command “forward” if a car is actively approaching. Instead of blind obedience, intelligent disobedience prioritizes safety through the dog’s evaluation of the environment. This makes this trait one of the most essential yet complex components of guide-dog training.

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## THE MATCH

Matching a dog to a handler is a highly individualized process that goes far beyond basic training, breeds, and preferences. The process is extensive and before a match is even considered, dog instructors evaluate the handler themselves including how they navigate, travel, use mobility/visual aids, and interpret environmental cues already. Guide dogs are not replacements for these skills, but rather complementary to them to increase the handler’s confidence and experiences.

Guide dog programs heavily rely on the details and background information of someone to paint a picture of their daily life. Factors must be identified, but positive and negative, that might affect dog-to-human partnership, as that is what this is, a partnership. Matches are not purely based on preferences, though important, but created primarily based on habits, strengths, and support systems for both the person and the dog. Instructors and trainers speak with those who know the application person well in order to uncover these important details.

With this, every single variable of daily life is considered, even something that might not seem impactful – walking pace. As one of the most critical factors of a match, it is vital that the dog’s speed aligns with the handler’s stride pace at a comfortable level. A successful match is not one considered perfect on paper, but one that results in a trusting partnership that allows for simpler navigation of the world.

All these elements together reveal that guide dogs are more than friendly, cozy, cute companions, but the result of extensive research, careful breeding, rigorous training, and thoughtful matching. Understanding this and the partnership between handler and guide dog makes it crystal clear why organizations and communities, such as that like Ski for Light, respect and praise the dogs for the work they do – and most importantly, let them do it.



*Photo from Google Images*