

A Day in the Life of...a Guide Dog in Training!

Hello again, it's your favorite Guide Dog puppy here! Things sure do move fast when you're having fun! If you can believe it, I'm now 16 months old and am back at the Guide Dogs' campus where I am learning how to be a Guide Dog! This formal training is a lot different than everything I learned while I was in my puppy raising home, but I am ready, and I think I'm catching on pretty quick!

When I arrived back here at campus, I met lots of new friends – dogs and people! I was greeted by really nice folks that work in both the Kennel and the Training Departments, and they helped me get settled in. I got a nice, big run all to myself! So many of the sights and smells here in the kennels are strangely familiar, as if I'm returning home... could I have been here before?

The dogs in my kennel are all newly-arrived, just like me! The group of us makes up what's known as "string," meaning that we are all being trained by the same team of instructors, and basically are all more or less at the same stage in our progress toward becoming guides. The first couple weeks we were here consisted of a full health exam and getting acquainted with training staff. We got our own kennel signs and collar tags, both of which are labeled in print and Braille for all staff to read. And our tattooed ears are getting checked often to make sure we are all in our proper places. Pretty soon, we have learned the kennel routine: when we are fed (twice a day!), when we play, and when we get to spend time with our instructors.

Not long after our arrival, we are "doubled" with a roommate, so we can enjoy some playtime in our runs, although we do get time to ourselves if that seems to be in our best interest (like, some dogs need to recover from spay or neuter surgeries, or simply prefer enjoy the calm quiet of a solo run. Me – I like to have a buddy!).

The Canine Welfare Technicians (CWTs for short!) work very closely with us. The CWT's primary role is to help ease our transition from home to the kennels, and they make it a lot of fun! There are so many ways that our time in the kennels is designed to be enjoyable. To start, the toys here are amazing! Nylabones and Kongs stuffed with frozen kibble – it just doesn't get any better than that! In addition, we enjoy "recess" in a huge community run several times a day with our kennelmate or other dogs in our string, and are pampered with cuddling sessions or campus walks by staff or qualified volunteers. Some of us even get to spend some time during the day snoozing in one of the many offices around campus. While we're in the kennels though, it's pretty peaceful. The people here do a fabulous job keeping the kennels a calm and quiet place for all of us.

Once we met our instructors, we began spending lots of time with them. One of the first things I learned was that whenever I heard a click, I would get a food treat – what a great deal! I got clicks for things that I learned in my puppy raising home: commands like "sit," "down" and "come"; walking calmly on a leash, and paying attention. I felt like a show-off, but all of that stuff was a piece of cake!

The next thing I learned was how to pull into a harness while walking on a treadmill, a funny-looking contraption with a moving belt. All the food and encouragement I received on my first session made the next few times on the treadmill something to look forward to! After I got the hang of it on the treadmill, my trainer and I hit the city streets. I learned how to consistently walk in a straight line both on sidewalks and across streets, and believe me, this sounds easier than it is at first! I had to learn to remain focused and responsible on my job, even with temptations like smells, food, people or other dogs all around! I eventually learned lots of new commands like "forward," "left," "right," "curb," "over here," and "hopp-up," (and "hopp-up" can have three different meanings!) Phew!

Along with all that guidework in town, my education continues on campus: I've learned how to interact with my string mates during recess (like sharing toys!), as well as other skills like walking through an obstacle course, backing out of a chute, and navigating agility equipment.

At about halfway through my training, I needed to demonstrate that I knew how to responsibly guide my blindfolded instructor and had a grasp of guidework basics: Did I remain focused and responsive to commands? Did I maintain consistent drive? Did I know how to keep the team on line and away from obstacles, know to stop at the beginning and end of blocks (at curbs), and can turn both left and right when asked? I'm happy to report, I sailed through my basic skills, and got to move on to even more advanced training.

The advanced work consists of navigating through buildings with all kinds of challenges (slick floors, stairs, elevators, and escalators); visits to big, bustling cities; awareness of overhead obstacles; traffic training (learning how to stay safe around cars); and rides on light rail and buses. Many of these concepts involve "intelligent disobedience" - meaning I get to ignore a command if it is unsafe (like refusing to enter a street if there is a car moving toward us), or if the command is impossible to execute (like not going forward because there is a wall in front of us). Either way, it is pretty fun to purposely refuse a command AND get rewarded for it!

Before I knew it, I was doing a 45-60 minute route in town with my blindfolded instructor that demonstrated my readiness to actually become a real working Guide Dog! My finished guidework responses and caution are greatly rewarded. Not to brag, but I excel at my traffic skills, nail all the obedience exercises, and sail through all the building tests as well (including wearing booties and a head collar). I love pleasing my instructor so much! But in the next phase of my journey, I'll be paired up with a new blind or visually impaired handler – yet another new person to dazzle with my new-found skills!

One thing I've learned with this whole Guide Dog career is that I need to be adaptable and ready for adventure! There are more new things for me to learn and places to see as I continue on my journey. I'll be eager to report some of those things the next time you hear from me when I will be heading into class! Good times ahead, but goodbye for now!

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