

# The Intelligent German Shepherd Dog Excels As The Ultimate Service Dog

Everyone is familiar with the extraordinary versatility of the German Shepherd Dog outside of the Conformation ring: Agility, Rally, Herding, Obedience, Avalanche, Schutzhund, Tracking, SAR, Law Enforcement, Narcotics & Bomb Detection, Personal Protection, and always as a great companion and family dog.

When blind Morris Frank returned from Switzerland in 1929 with GSD<sup>1</sup> Buddy leading the way, they opened the door that began a slow but inexorable movement that would be led by GSD lovers and proponents over the next century.

Slowly but surely dogs like those GSD's used in the Seeing Eye School in New Jersey, were being trained and utilized for other disabilities. The intelligence, trainability, and desire to work put GSD's at the top of the list as the breed of choice for these tasks. Some breeders began lines for temperament first and health second, as opposed to conformation/physical looks first and temperament second. These were the dogs that were selectively bred and used in various programs to assist people with disabilities. Even today, there are programs and schools that have their own breeding stock that they choose promising puppies from, rather than buying from outside breeders.



Morris Frank & Buddy shortly before she died in May 1938



Dakota leading me to safety, while still checking my status as evidenced by her ear position.

We all know that our GSD's are intelligent and eager to please, easily trained in obedience and protection. While we most often see them working in Law Enforcement, SAR, and the Military, we have to remember that their original purpose was to **herd**. Unlike having the "eye" of a Border Collie, the GSD follows his instinct to "work the furrow", patrolling a boundary all day long and restricting his animals from entering or leaving the designated area. You may find yourself or your children being "herded" in this manner by your GSD! Often they "follow ahead", which is walking in front of you and looking back to make sure you are going where you should.

I use my GSD, Dakota, for many medical issues. One of the things she does for me is counter-balance, or assisting with balance by using her body weight to oppose my own when I am unsteady or unable to move forward on my own. Utilizing a vest with a bridge handle that

<sup>1</sup> Common abbreviations used throughout this document: GSD=German Shepherd Dog. SD=Service Dog. SDiT=Service Dog in Training. PSD=Psychiatric Service Dog. PSDiT=Psychiatric Service Dog in Training. SAR=Search And Rescue. PTSD=Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

runs along the dog's spine puts Dakota in a "forward heel" position: her body is next to my leg, not shoulder. From this forward heel, Dakota leads me, navigating the way through crowds and obstacles, but she is constantly aware of my condition. Note how her ears are cocked back to listen for commands like "Left" or "Right". Additionally, Dakota will often turn her head to physically check on me.

Most people are familiar with guide dogs, and with dogs accompanying persons in a wheelchair. But the job of Service Dog has expanded and exploded recently to cover many disabilities, some of which are unseen. To utilize a SD, you must be considered disabled under the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), which means having a significant limitation in one or more major life functions (Faking a disability and the use of a SD can be punishable by law for dollar fines and jail time that vary depending on your state laws.) The American's with Disabilities Act (ADA), Title III, 28 CFR sec 36.104, defines a service animal as "any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a

physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability." 36.302 and State laws protect the rights of individuals with disabilities to be accompanied by their trained service animals in taxis, buses, trains, planes, restaurants, doctor's offices, schools, parks, hotels, hospitals (including Emergency Rooms), and all other public places. Some States are forward thinking enough to allow disabled persons with a Service Dog in Training (SDiT) the same rights as a full SD. The website of the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations can be researched here: <http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecfr&rgn=div5&view=text&node=41:3.1.1.3.22&idno=41#PartTop>

and the ADA site is: [http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleIII\\_2010/reg3\\_2010.html](http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleIII_2010/reg3_2010.html)

State laws can be found at: [http://www.animallaw.info/statutes/stusca\\_civil\\_54\\_55\\_2.htm](http://www.animallaw.info/statutes/stusca_civil_54_55_2.htm)

SD's are being trained for many invisible disabilities. GSD's have an excellent sense of smell. They can quickly learn to distinguish when their handler's blood sugar is off, whether their handler hasn't eaten or taken their medication, or if their handler's heart rate is off kilter, etc. Fourteen years ago, Dr. Joan Esnayra coined the term Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD). Nine years ago, she founded the Psychiatric Service Dog Society (PSDS) which offers free internet support groups (listservs) for all people partnered with PSDs or PSDs in training, Veterans partnered with PSDs and Clinicians who are interested in using PSDs to help their patients. Since 1997, over 15,000 people have been helped by PSDs in training their own dogs to be PSD's to mitigate mental health disabilities.



SDiT team Linden and Iris shopping. Iris performs work in the form of hallucination discernment, enabling Linden to lead a more normal and safe life.



PSD Dakota applying pressure and heat to mitigate panic attack. I'm grounding myself by synchronizing breathing to hers and stroking her and inhaling her scent.

I myself, a Vietnam Veteran and having spent 28 ½ years in the law enforcement field, suffer from PTSD. I was highly suicidal, chronically deeply depressed, and dependent on family and friends to do my shopping, as I couldn't leave my house even though on high doses of multiple medications. Once I acquired my GSD Dakota, joined PSDS at [www.psychdog.org](http://www.psychdog.org), and began training Dakota to assist me, I found my suicidal attempts and thoughts were removed, the preponderance of depression was lifted, and my medication was reduced from 11 prescriptions to 3 of low dosages. Dakota and I learned skills from the psychdog.org website and tips from the listserv that enabled us to work together as a team. Dakota learned my baseline, both physical and mental. As she started to respond to those changes, I would treat her and shape those responses into appropriate responses. Dakota quickly changed from **responding** to a change, to **alerting** to an on-coming change! It took me a while to recognize this, but once I did, the sky was the limit!



The statistics are high for our Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or Military Sexual Trauma (MST). Currently there is no long term scientific study that proves that PSD's help mitigate the symptoms of PTSD or MST. But there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that they do. Veteran's Affairs will provide a SD to a returning Veteran if they are physically disabled, but not if they are mentally disabled, such as for PTSD or MST. They do not support the owner trained model, either. Program trained dogs can be fine for a disabled person that needs a dog to do some physical tasks like picking up items, opening doors, pulling off clothes etc. But for psychiatric needs, a dog has to do 'work'—which involves

learning over time the handler's physiologic baseline, what shifts from that baseline mean, and how to respond. This cannot be trained by a school/program. This is something that has to be owner trained. The dog has to be with his partner to learn their baseline, so that they can discern when something is awry and begin to respond to that. Then the handler can shape that response however s/he needs. See [www.psychdog.org/tasks.html](http://www.psychdog.org/tasks.html) and <http://www.psychdog.org/veterans2.html> for lists of works/tasks for a PSD to assist and mitigate mental health issues.

So where does a disabled person go to get the GSD they want to train as their SD? First of all, they have to decide if they are going to do the training, or if they are going to get a program trained dog.

If the GSD comes from a program, it will have been trained many tasks by the time you meet her/him. The program will probably require you to come to its facilities for anywhere from 3 days to 2 weeks. That will give them the time to get you matched with the most appropriate dog, and then to learn all the commands and how to handle your new partner. Most programs will be charging you anywhere from a couple thousand dollars to \$20,000. It can be very expensive. There are programs that provide dogs and training that is free to Veterans. Some of these programs are total rip offs, in it only for the money. Some programs turn out nicely trained robotic dogs that are very good at physical tasks for physically disabled persons. But I'd be leery of any program that does not engage the disabled person very heavily in the training process for a PSD. The works that are needed from a PSD are not something that can be cookie cutter trained.

If you choose to buy your GSD and owner train, there are several avenues you can follow. You can check with the American German Shepherd Rescue Association ([www.agsra.com](http://www.agsra.com)) if you wish to go the rescue route. You will know ahead of time the temperament of the dog from the person(s) that have been fostering it. You will know something of its history. You will be doing a good deed in rescuing a dog. This was the route I started on and came across my Kota. You can use the German Shepherd Dog Club of America ([www.gsdca.org](http://www.gsdca.org)) site to start your search for a reputable



breeder. Some are very generous and will let you have a pup or young dog that doesn't meet conformation standards, for a greatly discounted price or even for free. But do your homework first! Research the bloodlines, check that the breeder does perform all the necessary tests for GSD's and get to know the dam personally, as she is the best indicator of the temperament of her offspring. Take a knowledgeable person (preferably a trainer) with you to temperament test the pup or dog. Go to GSD shows and put the word out that you're looking for a pup or young dog for a SD. If you see a dog(s) that appears to have a temperament/behavior that you admire, make contact with the handler and find out what kennel the dog came from and see if the owner is present; then contact them. I do not recommend getting a pup or young dog from advertisements in the newspaper, Craig's List or places like that. I know some are legit, but the majority are back yard breeders looking for money, not to better the breed. They can be as bad as puppy mills. Join your local GSD breed club. Attend meetings and training dates. Make contacts and learn who has pups or dogs available.

I think the biggest growing population of Service Dogs needed is Psychiatric Service Dogs. So many of our women and men are returning from war stations overseas with diagnosis of MST and PTSD and are choosing to utilize PSDs as part of their treatment protocol. As Dr. Joan Esnayra, the President and Founder of Psychiatric Service Dog Society says:

"The VA will not provide any service dog benefits for veterans with PTSD or other psychiatric conditions. The VA claims that it must wait for the conclusion of the Franken Study which is supposed to test the efficacy of psychiatric service dogs for veterans living with mental health disabilities. The problem with this stance is that the VA is willing to provide service dog benefits for veterans with physical disabilities, even though, service dogs for this purpose have never been assessed scientifically for efficacy. Furthermore, the Franken Study mandates that the VA conduct a scientific research study on the efficacy of **both** service dogs for physical and for mental disabilities. Nonetheless, the VA has decided not to abide by the congressional mandate in so far as it intends to conduct a study on psychiatric service dogs but not service dogs for veterans with physical disabilities. Thus, the VA is employing a **double-standard** on the issue of service dog benefits for veterans. On the one hand, it is willing to provide service dog benefits for veterans with physical disabilities, even though the use of such dogs has never been proven in the context of a scientific study. Yet, it refuses to provide a service dog benefit for veterans with mental health disabilities because, the VA claims, the use of such dogs has never been proven in the context of a scientific study. Write to your Congressional representatives today. This is the manifestation of stigma and it must be stopped. The

Franken Study will not conclude (realistically) for another four years! How many veterans will commit suicide before the VA feels that it has enough evidence to act?"

This is a very sad fact. Having a mental disability label is very hard to bear. It is still a terrible stigma in our society. How can we treat those who need it the most when we discriminate against them? It was very hard for me to accept that I was mentally disabled. It was very hard to try and explain to Dakota's breeder that I needed her to be my Service Dog, and dance around the Psychiatric issues, afraid her breeder wouldn't let me have her. I will be forever grateful to Dakota's breeder for her generosity for letting me have this magnificent GSD to be my life partner, my life saver, and my heart dog.

I would like to see more breeders open to working with people having invisible disabilities obtain a good GSD pup to be their PSD/SD. Quality pups are needed to be raised by the individual so that the bond is created as soon as possible. Each must learn the other's cues through body language. The pup/dog will learn the person's physiologic baseline and therefore note when it is off kilter and start to respond to that. The individual will start to see the dog's body language cuing to that change. S/He can then start to shape that cue into an appropriate and desired behavior. As the cue/behavior is positively reinforced over time, the **response** is often changed into an **alert**. This is the most wondrous thing to have in a PSD/SD used for invisible disabilities. With a sensitive GSD that alerts to an oncoming incident, the individual can let his/her GSD lead him/her to a safe place where the GSD can mitigate the episode or prevent it from occurring at all. This is something that my Dakota is very good at, and that I am very grateful for.

If more GSD breeders were more sensitive to the needs of persons with invisible disabilities, then more quality dogs would be on the streets assisting them to lead a normal life. What do breeders do with a pup that is perfectly healthy, but lacks something that prevents the pup from going into the show ring: perhaps too big or small, maybe the coat is all wrong, or the ears never did stand up. If the pup has an excellent temperament and is healthy, the breeder would probably sell the pup as a companion dog to a family.

Is it possible to get some breeders on board to supply a pup every year or two or three to a person with invisibilities? Most of us are on disability income, which is quite small, but we can make monthly payments, if the breeder does not wish to donate the pup. For invisible disabilities, the very best way to train a PSD/SD is to get a pup and owner train it. The bond that is formed between pup and handler is so very important to get the pup to learn those physical & emotional baselines. Of the few breeders I know, they usually produce 1 litter a year. I wonder if they would be willing to do this once every 3 years or so. Would they be willing to donate a pup? Would they be willing to offer a discounted pup? I would love to know what breeders think of this idea.

So how do you react upon seeing a GSD in vest partnered with a disabled person? You've been breeding or handling GSD's for years, and your first inclination is to reach out and pet the dog. Then you see the stricken or disapproving look on the person's face about the same time you see the patch on the dog's vest reading "DO NOT PET". A SD/PSD is **not** a pet; it is a working dog as a medical assistive device and is on duty when in vest. Its job is to primarily focus on its partner to alert to oncoming medical conditions (visible & invisible), and then to mitigate them; to provide the works or tasks required of it when out in public. If you engage with the dog, the focus is taken off the handler and that could be a recipe for disaster!

Do you have any idea what goes into the care of a SD? I think much more than a show dog! Our SD's must be presentable at all times, since they are with us 24/7. Being out in the public so much, they must be clean and highly professional. Going to the corner store for milk and bread? You have to get out the brushes, do a thorough grooming, make sure your vest, leash and gear are clean and in good repair, pack up everything you might need, load up the car, seatbelt buckle your SD in, drive to the store, a quick brush before you go in, do your shopping, drive home, then fill out your on-going log of how your SD did in public.

You have to give your GSD regular baths to keep them clean and nice-smelling, same with all your gear. You have to keep your supplies ready to go: educational cards and brochures for the public and businesses, cleanup stuff, copies of the law, emergency meds and supplies, training treats, extra leashes & collars, a mat for your GSD to lie on, water, food and bowls.

Your GSD will require at least one long walk a day, and at least one rigorous play time per day. S/He will also benefit with a brain challenge every day too from using one of the many new brain games that are on the market. You are in the spotlight the moment you walk out the door with your beautiful GSD. You will be constantly stopped by the public and asked hordes of intrusive questions. For the most part, it is just intense curiosity on their part. They sincerely want to know how and why you get to have your GSD in

### Do's and don'ts when around a SD/PSD

- ✓ Talk to the person (not to the dog) just as you would anyone else you come in contact with
- ✓ If you hear a SD/PSD bark once or twice, ask the person if they need help, as barking is frequently used as a signal that a medical incident is about to occur
- ✓ If you think the disabled person needs help, ask them first before just stepping in. If they do need help, offer your arm, do not pull on them, and let them handle their dog
- ✓ If you have your dog with you and you're approaching a guide dog team, call out your position and distance to them and what side you're going to be passing by
- ✓ Never pet, offer food/water, yell/call out, make barking/meowing sounds, or distract the dog in any way
- ✓ Always ask the person first before touching either them or their dog. Don't be offended if the person says no to your request to pet. Don't be offended if the person doesn't want to discuss their medical disability with you
- ✓ Never attempt to take the dog's leash, vest, or harness away from the disabled person. The dog is NEVER to be separated from his person. They are to remain together at all times, including in an ambulance, the emergency room, and any hospital room
- ✓ Do not talk down to the disabled person. Having a disability is not an indication of their level of intelligence. Do not ask about their disability. Sharing medical information is a very private matter. If the person chooses to talk about their dog and their disabilities, feel free to engage.

public places and how they can get to bring their dog to the store. As much as you'd like to be "normal" and just do your shopping like everyone else, when you're out with a gorgeous GSD, you will be swarmed by people admiring your dog, and you will have to educate, educate, educate... and end up being the subject of many unwanted photographs.

Every day your GSD is by your side, regardless of what you are doing. If you're taking the trash out, s/he is by your side. If you're being taken to the hospital ER, s/he is in the ambulance and ER with you. If you're going on vacation, your GSD is in the hotel room with you – and no pet charge! Your GSD SD, by law is allowed everywhere the public is allowed with very few exceptions, those being: operating rooms, sterile environments (like burn units), private clubs, and churches.

With my GSD PSD by my side, I have the courage to leave my house and go out into the world and do "normal" things that I could not do before. Dakota serves me faithfully, guiding me to safety if I start to get overwhelmed or start to have a panic attack. She is able to act swiftly, getting me to a safe place, and 9 times out of 10, is able to stop the attack before it hits. My GSD is amazing! Without the help of the Psychiatric Service Dog Society, I would not have learned how to train her and shape her behaviors into proper responses while in public. I am indebted to the work Dr. Joan Esnayra has done to help all the members, particularly us Veterans.

In closing, the nicest thing you can do for a SD/PSD Team is to compliment the disabled person on their GSD's beauty and its outstanding manners in public. My Dakota is a gorgeous long coated GSD and I take pride in having that luscious coat groomed to a shiny perfection every time we walk out the door. To have someone say something about how beautiful she is and how well she behaves makes me swell with pride!