

By Jen Reeder

RUNNING

GUIDES

Labs excel as running companions through a groundbreaking program at Guiding Eyes for the Blind.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GUIDING EYES FOR THE BLIND

Thomas Panek and Gus in 2019 after finishing United Airlines Half Marathon in New York City.



In a day in 2019, Thomas Panek attempted to become the first blind person to complete the United Airlines Half Mara-

thon in New York City – with a relay team of three remarkable Labs.

As president and CEO of the nonprofit Guiding Eyes for the Blind, Panek was well aware that the prevailing wisdom had always been that people with vision loss should not run with their guide dogs because they might get injured. But a sedentary lifestyle can have negative physical and mental health impacts, and he wanted to show the world that people who are blind should have the opportunity to enjoy active, independent lifestyles.



When the starting shot fired, Panek sped off with a large black Lab named Westley by his side. Westley's big paws – protected by special running shoes – proved as steady as his personality as they navigated the throng of runners.

"Westley was working his way through the crowds – just big paws, big dog, very steady," Panek recalls.

At the five-mile mark, Westley's sister Waffle took over as Panek's guide dog. The fleet yellow Lab seemed delighted by the opportunity to showcase her speed.

"Whereas Westley was more like a horse, Waffle was a rocket," Panek says. "She just took off, and she was very, very capable."

Fittingly, for the final leg of the 13-mile race, Panek's own guide dog Gus stepped in as the team's anchor. The yellow Lab had been training almost daily with Panek for the historic event and guided him to the finish line.

"I felt the timing mat beneath my feet, and it was a very emotional moment," Panek says. "I burst into tears of joy. To be able to rely on dogs to be able to accomplish something that had never been done before in the history of mankind – a blind runner running that distance guided by a dog at that speed – it was a first."

Panek is quick to credit the Labs as well as their puppy raisers and trainers for the accomplishment – "It was definitely a 'we' moment; it wasn't a 'me' moment" – and to share his passion with others.

So after the race, he created a unique program at Guiding Eyes for the Blind: Running Guides, which trains guide dogs to run alongside their handlers.

NEVER PET GUIDE DOGS

It's important to never pet a dog wearing a service dog vest – and to speak to the human handler, not the dog. "I know they're adorable, but as tempting as it is to pet them, they're performing a job," says Marin Baumer. "When they're distracted, their mind is not on the task at hand."

It's the first and only program of its kind. So far, 89 Running Guides – all Labs – have partnered with Guiding Eyes graduates. Like all guide dogs trained by the nonprofit, they're provided free of charge.

"Part of the Running Guides program is about keeping people hopeful, keeping people active, and pushing back on stereotypes," Panek says.

It's also about keeping the Labs happy and healthy. Since a whopping 92 percent of the nonprofit's graduates are Labs, Panek worked with his team to design a special harness that accommodates for the side-to-side gait of a Lab. He's also developing "Panek Paws," special canine booties to protect their feet on runs.

Dogs don't run when the temperature and humidity reach certain levels, and whenever runners take a drink of water, they offer some to their guide dogs in collapsible bowls.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIN BAUMER

Marin Baumer runs with Kegan.

“We have an incredible bond. I say to people all the time that he truly feels like a part of me – like an appendage at this point. He’s always next to me.”



Thomas Panek pets a Guiding Eyes for the Blind guide dog in training.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GUIDING EYES FOR THE BLIND

“We really care about the conditions that we run in so that we protect the dogs’ health and wellbeing,” he says. “It’s incredibly important to us.”

For the past three years, Panek has run with Running Guides graduate Blaze, a yellow Lab who loves running as much as his handler. The six-year-old dog also loves the treats he gets at the end of a good run.

“I recently heard the expression, ‘You never know how much of the world is edible until you have a Lab,’” he says with a laugh. “You’re constantly trying to take the dog’s food drive and motivation and reorient that toward guide and running work. Blaze exhibits the best of Labs, so he really understands that there’s gold at the end of the rainbow at the end of the race: a very positive food experience.”

While only about one percent of humans ever compete in marathons, about 10 percent of the Labs at Guiding Eyes for the Blind compete as Running Guides, which Panek believes is a testament to how much dogs love to run.

“Labs are exceptionally good – just like we are – at conditioning to the distance,” he notes.

Panek says running with a guide dog is very different than running on a treadmill or being tethered to another human. He and Blaze have fun trail running in nature over complex terrain.

“There will be rocks, boulders, trees,” he says. “Blaze knows when to slow down, and if he thinks I’m going to trip on a boulder or a branch, or if a tree is down, he’ll stop. He’ll put his front paws up on the tree, and I’ll feel for it. Then we’ll go over it and keep running.”

Panek and his current guide dog Blaze.

The ability to enjoy outdoor adventures with a Running Guides dog has been a wonderful surprise for Marin Baumer, who partnered with a yellow Lab named Kegan in May of 2021 – nearly two years to the day after the recent college graduate lost her sight in a car accident.

“After losing my sight, I was well aware of guide dogs, but I didn’t know the extent to which they accommodated blind people and how much he would make my life more independent and accessible,” she says. “So when I heard about the Running Guides program, I said, ‘Absolutely – sign me up.’ I didn’t know that was something possible.”

Kegan loves not just running but hiking, walking, and kayaking with Baumer – anything active. He’s a charmer who loves little kids; when off-harness, he follows around Baumer’s four-year-old niece to make sure the girl is safe. But he shares his closest bond with Baumer.

“I love the fact that when I pet him and give him hugs and cuddles, he will put his paws on me and pet me back, which is so funny,” she says. “We have an incredible bond. I say to people all the time that he truly feels like a part of me – like an appendage at this point. He’s always next to me.”

Partnering with a guide dog has proved life-changing for Baumer, who felt intimidated and alone when learning to use a cane.

“I definitely still struggle and have hurdles that we face on a day-to-day basis, but it’s that much easier to face those struggles when you have a partner by your side that just wants to support and love you,” she says. “They truly are God’s gift and man’s best friend. I feel very fortunate to be linked up with Guiding Eyes and to have received such an amazing gift.” 🐾

Guiding Eyes for the Blind hopes active Lab lovers on the East Coast will volunteer as puppy raisers for the Running Guides program to accommodate more athletes who are blind. For more information, visit: www.guidingeyes.org.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.

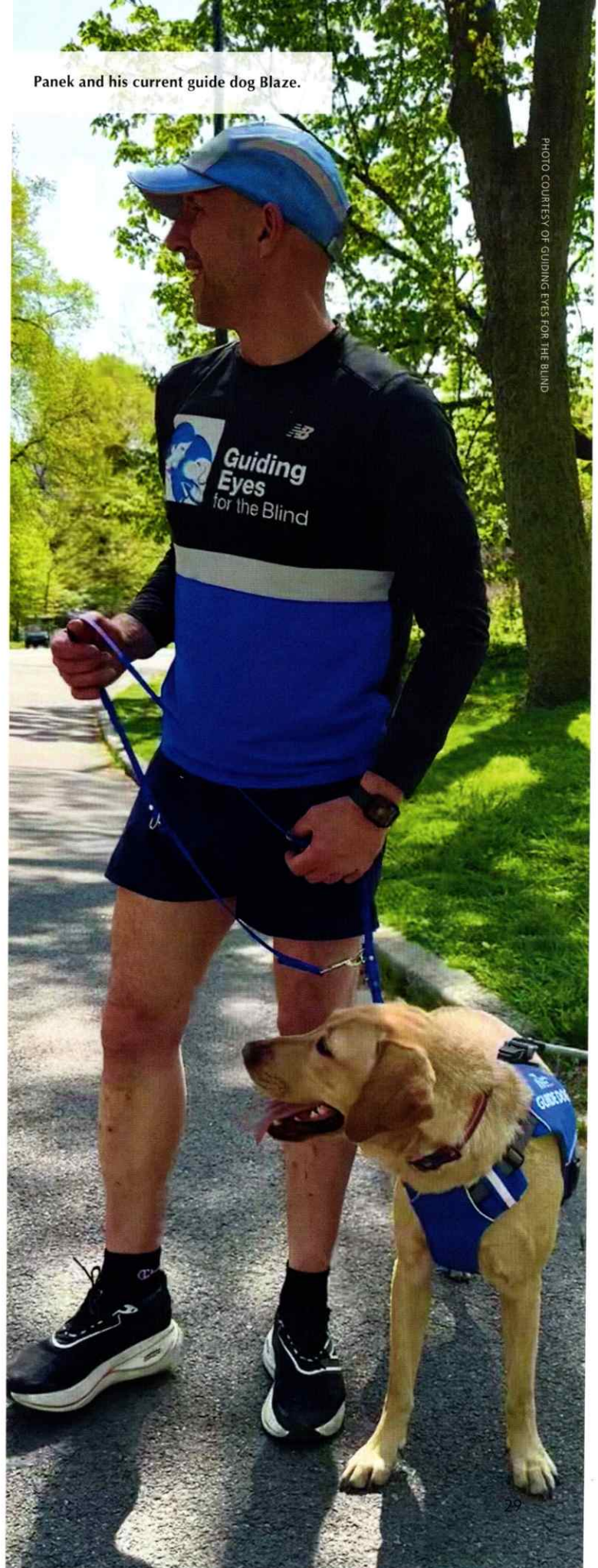


PHOTO COURTESY OF GUIDING EYES FOR THE BLIND