

Assessing canine breed versatility using a data-based versatility index

Douglas V. Ljungren and Mary R. Burch*

Abstract: This is the very first data-based study to report on the versatility of 134 dog breeds. The purpose of this study was to create and apply a Versatility Index for breeds that had earned a title in designated sports in the 10 years from 2014-2023 and to rank the most versatile breeds. Using American Kennel Club (AKC) records of 493,477 dogs who earned titles in 18 sports, breeds were ranked, and the ten “most versatile” breeds were identified. There were 17,299 dogs with titles in the top ten breeds. Seven of the 18 sports in which all breeds could participate were targeted for analysis. For this study, versatility was defined as the breed earning a title in a variety of activities in which pet dogs participated with their owners. To provide background information on breed versatility, two surveys were conducted. Experienced dog trainers responded to a one question survey to determine the general perceptions of dog trainers regarding versatile breeds, and breed experts of the top ten breeds on the versatility index responded to a two-question survey related to the versatility of their specific breeds. The degree of association across sports was analyzed to determine if success in one sport was an indicator of breed versatility. The results of this study show that some breeds that are not typically expected to be the most versatile scored higher on the Versatility Index than breeds that are often perceived by trainers as the most versatile. The results also show that dogs who earned Obedience/Rally titles were more likely to earn titles in other areas.



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A versatility index was developed to assess the versatility of 134 dog breeds.
- Breeds not expected to be versatile scored higher on the versatility index than breeds typically perceived as the most versatile.
- Dogs who earned Obedience/Rally titles were more likely to earn titles in other areas.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the process of selective breeding has developed dog breeds that are able to perform important work to help people. Early in the history of breeds, there were dogs whose work included hunting, retrieving, herding, and protection (Ackerman 2024). Over time, a primary function of dogs evolved into serving as devoted canine companions. Families now choose dogs as companions that are viewed as family members, and in addition to dogs being family companions, there are a total of 3.7 million annual entries in American Kennel Club (AKC) sports that demonstrate that popularity of training for and participating in organized activities with one's dog (American Kennel Club 2023).

In the past two decades, a significant amount of research has focused on a variety of issues pertaining to canine learning and the training of dogs. Specific topics have included the origins of breeds and genetics (Famula 2001; MacLean et al. 2019; Morrill et al. 2022), benefits of dog ownership and choosing a breed (Ackerman 2024; Boruta et al. 2016; Diverio et al. 2016; King et al. 2009; Levine et al. 2013), individual breeds including breed typical behaviors and breed differences in physical structure, cognition, and temperament (Asp et al. 2015; Junntila et al. 2022; Marshall-Pescini et al. 2016; Mehrkam and Wynne 2014; Svartberg 2006), principles of training (Mills 2005); evaluating behavior in pet and working dogs (Hare et al. 2024; Hsu and Serpell 2003), dog-human interactions, and the human-companion animal bond (Friedmann and Son 2009; Gee et al. 2021; Greenebaum 2010; Horowitz 2021). Some recent research has also been focused on ethics and dog welfare (Duranton and Horowitz 2019; MacLean et al. 2021) and quality of life (Kiddie and Collins 2015).

Another area that has been the subject of research relates to the benefits of training. Bennett and Rohlf (2007) distributed a questionnaire to 413 dog owners. Dog owners who engaged in training activities with their dogs reported that the dogs were more friendly and less aggressive toward both familiar and unfamiliar people and dogs. Dogs that received training were also less likely to bark excessively and they were less nervous. Engaging in shared activities such as going for rides in the car, playing games with the owner, grooming, and spending time sitting with the dog resulted in predicted lower scores for problem behaviors such as disobedience, unfriendliness/aggression, nervousness, anxiety, destructiveness, and excitability. As with training activities, the friendliness of the dog was also predictive of shared activities. This study indicated that training activities have a positive effect on building the characteristics of an ideal family dog. These characteristics include calmness, adaptability, and being social and easy to manage.

Diverio et al. (2016) conducted another study that addressed training for companion dogs. Questionnaires were sent to 770 Italian dog owners to determine their perceptions of the ideal companion dog. Older adults who were surveyed felt training was important. Other desirable characteristics were that dogs should be safe with children, housetrained, healthy, friendly, and obedient. Most of the participants of this survey reported that dog behavior is more influenced by training than genetics.



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In a similar study in Australia, King et al. (2009) surveyed 877 participants. Ideal characteristics of companion dogs were identified as being safe with children, housetrained, friendly, healthy, and obedient. The participants wanted their dogs to come when called and not be destructive or escape the property. In this study, 40.7% of owners felt it was important for dogs to be obedient, but very few of the owners listed trainability (3.6%) as an important characteristic of the ideal dog. This suggests that dog owners may not have recognized the connection between basic obedience and trainability.

In some research related to training, the behavior of handlers was also studied. The effects of specific handling procedures during training were reported by Gerencsér et al. (2016) in a study that examined handler-dog interactions when responses to two obedience commands ("sit" and "down") were measured. An important and unique aspect of this study was that it was not a survey/questionnaire. Unlike most canine studies, it involved direct observation of handler and dog behavior.

The selection, assessment, and training of dogs that perform specific jobs has also been examined by researchers. Some of these jobs include animal-assisted therapy in which dogs and their handlers volunteer to help others (Barker and Gee 2021), service dogs (Bray et al. 2021; Rodriguez et al. 2018), and police dogs (Brady et al. 2018; Jezierski et al. 2014). One category of dogs that perform specific jobs that has been studied is the general category of working dogs. In addition to service and therapy work, some working dog tasks are detection, search and rescue, military and police work, and medical search work that is as sophisticated as trained dogs using their olfactory senses to find cancer (Bray et al. 2021; Cobb et al. 2021; Hall et al. 2021; Nelson and Wiles 2022). Alexander et al. (2011) evaluated 177 responses to an online survey and showed that for search dog performance, there was a strong association between the time spent training and the performance success, with 4 hours or more each week having a higher association with national certifications ($P < 0.001$). Respondents were experienced handlers, and they indicated a preference to begin training before dogs were 6 months old in both obedience (86%) and agility (55%).

A large body of research (MacLean et al. 2021) has addressed topics related to training dogs for home manners (e.g., sit, down, come) and specific dog related sports. Every weekend, tens of thousands of dog owners and their dogs participate in sports such as agility, obedience, rally, conformation shows, field events, good manners training and testing, and many other activities. Dog owners provide multiple reasons for participating in dog sports with their dogs. Gillespie et al. (2002) interviewed 61 dog sports participants and described "serious leisure" that can help shape a social identity for the human participants. The comments of interviewees were descriptive in nature. Comments such as, "At herding there is a sense of caring and community..." show that the social aspect of dog sports is clearly important to some participants.

Farrell et al. (2015) and Todd (2015) also found that the social aspects of dog sports were important to many dog owners. In a study with 85 participants, Farrell et al. (2015) distributed three questionnaires to determine what



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motivates people to participate in dog sports. Open-ended questions such as, “Describe the reasons you participate in dog sports,” were included. Self-determined motivation (e.g., enjoyment, achieving goals) was a major factor with those who competed in activities such as agility, obedience, tracking, conformation, and field and hunt tests. The majority of participants (80%) were involved in two and up to as many as five different sports with their dog. The reasons given for participating in dog sports included a developing a stronger connection to the dog, the social aspects, enjoyment, physical activity for the dog and person, competition and accomplishment, and the learning that can come through training. Earning prizes and titles was another reason given for dog sport participation.

In a study with Swedish sporting and working trial dogs, 1,615 handlers responded to a questionnaire. After data cleaning, the data from 1,582 dogs who participated in working trials, obedience, rally, and agility were analyzed (Essner et al. 2022). Dog handlers responded to an online survey related to physical activity (e.g., taking the dog for a walk), sport specific training, physical conditioning (repeated, structured movements), and management (e.g., warm-up exercises). The number of sports that each handler and dog participated in was between one and up to five sports with 48% of the dogs engaging in one sport. As an indicator of handler commitment to training, of the working dogs in this study, 60% participated in at least 3 hours of sport-specific training per week to prepare for trials and competitions.

Trainability

Within the dog training literature, researchers have addressed the topic of “trainability.” Trainability is “a dog’s willingness to attend to its owner and obey commands, with high motivation and resistance to correction with low levels of distractibility” (Serpell & Hsu 2005). Information on dogs that have been relinquished to animal shelters suggests that some aspects of trainability, such as responding correctly to obedience commands, can make an important difference in maintaining a good relationship between a dog and its owner (Salman et al. 2000). Many studies on trainability measure breed differences in performance with reports and surveys. The Canine Behavioral Assessment and Research Questionnaire (C-BARQ©) is widely used standardized survey instrument that measures specific aspects of canine behavior and temperament. The C-BARQ© includes a Trainability section on which dog owners indicate their dog’s obedience or trainability on items such as, “when off the leash, returns immediately when called,” “slow to learn new tricks or tasks,” “obeys the sit command immediately,” and “obeys the down command immediately.” In a study with 1,563 dog owners and 11 popular breeds, the C-BARQ© trainability scores for the Labrador Retriever were the highest and the scores for the Bassett Hound were the lowest (Serpell & Hsu 2005).

Other researchers have also addressed the trainability of specific breeds. Turcsan et al. (2011) evaluated trainability and boldness traits in dog breed clusters. These clusters included categories that were related genetically (e.g., ancient breeds, hunting breeds, mountain cluster) as well as the seven American Kennel Club (AKC) breed groups (i.e., Sporting, Hounds, Working



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dogs, Terriers, Toy dogs, Non-sporting, and Herding). Owners of 5,733 dogs of 98 breeds responded to the survey. In this study, a cluster analysis showed that herding breeds were the easiest to train. These results are somewhat inconsistent with the results of Serpell & Hsu's study (2005) showing that a sporting breed, the Labrador Retriever, had the highest trainability scores.

In a study of agility competition winners, breeds perceived to be high and low in trainability did not deviate from their levels of sport performance (Helton, 2010). Breeds that were high in trainability in agility, a competitive sport in which dogs go through an obstacle course, were homogeneous with respect to height. Because dogs with longer legs can run faster, performance differences are likely to be related to physical attributes rather than training ability. Helton used the term, "perceived trainability" between dog breeds (Helton 2010). "Perceived" is an important aspect to consider when discussing trainability.

Versatility

In the general sense, versatility is defined as being capable of performing a variety of different tasks. As it relates to dog breeds, versatility can be measured when a breed has demonstrated success in a variety of sport activities. One organization, the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA), defines a versatile dog within the context of hunting as one "that is bred and trained to dependably hunt and point game, to retrieve on both land and water, and to track wounded game on both land and water." The 35 breeds of versatile hunting dogs as identified by NAVHDA (see Appendix A) are also expected to be well-mannered companions in the home (NAVHDA, n.d.). Most of the NAVHDA breeds are not breeds registered with the American Kennel Club. Some breeds recognized by both NAVHDA and the American Kennel Club include the Bracco Italiano, Brittany, English Setter, Gordon Setter, Irish Red & White Setter, Irish Setter, Pointer, Vizsla, Weimaraner, Wirehaired Pointing Griffon and the Wirehaired Vizsla.

While most researchers have not specifically used the word "versatility," they have studied dogs who have demonstrated proficiency in multiple areas. For example, Svartberg (2006) and Asp et al. (2015) found that breeds with different types of dog show and training awards tend to be less fearful and more playful than breeds that are not as versatile.

It remains unclear why the topic of versatility among breeds is virtually nonexistent in canine research. As a result, "perceived versatility" regarding breed rankings (i.e., breeds commonly thought to be at the top of a breed versatility list) is not necessarily accurate. A possible reason for the lack of breed versatility research could be researchers' lack of access to data.

The primary purpose of this study was to develop a Versatility Index designed to take into consideration the population of each breed and rank breeds that are successfully participating in multiple sports. Using the index, breeds can be ranked according to their versatility.



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METHOD

This study had three components which were 1) a survey of experienced trainers, 2) a survey of breed experts and, 3) an analysis of data from the Versatility Index.

Survey of Experienced Trainers

A survey was conducted to determine which breeds experienced trainers thought of as the most versatile. The purpose of this survey was to generate hypotheses about which breeds were the most versatile according to trainer perceptions that could be tested against the Versatility Index. An email survey was sent to 8,887 experienced dog trainers who had at least two years of experience teaching other people and their dogs and had worked with a variety of breeds. The trainers were asked to respond to the survey question, "Please tell us the top five purebred breeds that you think are the most versatile. Versatility for this purpose is defined as the breed being successful at a variety of sports/activities." Each trainer ranked the five breeds they listed from the first (#1) to the fifth (#5) most versatile. The authors then counted the responses developed a list in ranking order of the ten most versatile breeds according to trainer perceptions.

Survey of Breed Experts

In addition to the survey sent to experienced dog trainers, a second survey was sent to breed experts. Whereas the purpose of the experienced dog trainer survey was to identify trainer perceptions about the versatility of all breeds with which they had experience, the purpose of the breed expert survey was to determine if breed experts perceived their specific breeds as versatile, and if so, what characteristics made them versatile. The results of this survey were useful for generating hypotheses pertaining to why specific breeds may be versatile.

Each AKC breed has a national parent club whose responsibility is to preserve and protect the breed. Each breed has a written standard of the ideal dog for the breed. These standards were written by parent club breed experts, and they are the standards by which dogs are judged in conformation dog shows. Both form (i.e., the physical structure of the dog) and function (i.e., what the breed was created to do such as hunting, herding or guarding) are taken into consideration in each breed's written standard. Breed standards provide a general description of the ideal dog as well as details related to temperament. Some breed standards (e.g., Belgian Tervuren and Flat-Coated Retriever) include the term "versatile" as a characteristic of the breed. Other breed standards list a variety of activities at which the breed excels, implying that the breed is versatile. For all of the 10 most versatile American Kennel Club breeds as determined by the Versatility Index, their parent clubs administer versatility programs that differ in their structure, but they all have the same objective which is to encourage dog owners to try a variety of sports with their dogs.

To gain practical information regarding the perceived versatility of a breed, the president and secretary of the breed's national parent club for the top ten most



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versatile breeds (according to the Versatility Index) were contacted. The parent clubs are AKC clubs based in the United States. Contact was via an email that asked 1) if they felt the breed was versatile, and 2) what characteristics of the breed help it succeed in a variety of sports?

Versatility Index

The Versatility Index was used to test the hypotheses about breed versatility that were generated by the experienced trainer surveys. Specifically, the VI was a data-based evaluation that analyzed titles earned by dogs of specific breeds to determine which breeds were the most successful in a variety of sports. The breeds identified by the VI as the most versatile could be compared to the top ten most versatile breeds identified by the experienced trainers.

Beginning with ten years of American Kennel Club recorded dog titles (2014-2023) for the more than 200 breeds listed by the American Kennel Club (AKC), versatility by breed was quantified. The titles in this study were limited to titles earned by 493,477 AKC registered dogs. All titles earned by each dog within a breed were assigned to 18 different sports in which dog owners participated with their pet dogs. Pet dogs are dogs who live with families or individuals and their primary purpose is to provide companionship as opposed to working dogs such as military or police dogs. The sports in which dog owners and their dogs participated included: Agility, Obedience/Rally, Scent Work, Tracking, AKC Temperament Test (ATT) or Therapy, Conformation, Coursing, Good Manners (including Canine Good Citizen and related titles), Field and Hunt tests, Herding, Earth Dog, Coon Hound, Parent Club Field events, Schutzhund, Barn Hunt, Disc Dog, Dock Diving, and Working Dog. Some of these sports are specific to particular breeds or breed types. As an example, Earth Dog is an activity in which dogs crawl through underground tunnels to seek out protected quarry. The breeds that participate in Earth Dog are usually long and low-slung such as Dachshunds and various terriers. A larger breed, such as a Mastiff or Great Dane, would not be suitable for this activity. For this reason, this study only targeted seven sports in which all breeds could participate. The seven sports were Agility, Obedience/Rally, Scent Work, AKC Temperament Test (ATT) or Therapy, Conformation, Coursing (which includes the Coursing Ability Test [CAT] and Fast CAT), and Good Manners.

A Pearson correlation (r) was used to show the correlation between the Versatility Index and the seven sports. In this study, the Pearson correlation was used to determine whether a breed's success in any of the seven sports (e.g., Obedience, Conformation) is linearly associated with its Versatility Index. The initial exploratory analysis indicated a strong linear trend in the lower range (0 to 0.4) of feature values, which justified the use of the Pearson correlation for this analysis. The analysis was carried out using the software R.

Calculating the Versatility Index

For each dog, no more than one title was counted per category. For example, if a dog had three different agility titles (e.g., Novice, Open, Excellent), the agility



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category was counted as one for that dog. The total number of dogs in each category with a title was calculated for all dogs of each breed. Categories were divided by the total number of dogs in the breed that had earned at least one title in a particular category. This produced the breed Versatility Index for the breed. Using an approach that limits the population to dogs that have earned at least one title eliminates the non-versatility bias for popular “pet” breeds whose owners may not participate in organized sport activities. Breeds were ranked based on their Versatility Index score. To prevent a small number of highly titled dogs from skewing the index, only breeds with at least 500 titled dogs over ten years were considered in this study. A total of 134 breeds met this criterion. There were 17,299 total dogs with titles in the breeds ranked in the top ten.

The Versatility Index for a breed can be calculated using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Total titling categories dogs have earned titles in}}{\text{Total dogs with titles in the Breed.}}$$

$$\div$$

Total dogs with titles in the Breed.

As an example of how the Versatility Index was calculated for an individual breed, there were 2,370 Belgian Tervurens in the study. In total, these dogs earned a total of 4,967 titles across the sport categories. The breed Versatility Index for Belgian Tervurens is 2.10. To make this calculation, there were 4,967 titles earned ÷ 2,370 Belgian Tervurens = 2.095. This was scored as a versatility index of 2.10.

RESULTS

The results below are from 1) the survey of experienced trainers, 2) the survey of breed experts and, 3) from the analysis of data from the Versatility Index.

Survey of Experienced Trainers

The survey of experienced trainers identified breeds that are generally expected to be versatile. Trainers often develop their perceptions about the versatility of specific breeds based on observations in their classes of breeds that learn quickly and excel at specific training activities such as obedience.

From the email survey that was sent to 8,887 experienced dog trainers, there were 1,658 responses (19%) to the survey question, “Please tell us the top five purebred breeds that you think are the most versatile. Versatility for this purpose is defined as the breed being successful at a variety of sports/activities.” The 1,658 trainers who responded to the survey identified a total of ninety-two breeds. Each trainer ranked the five breeds they listed from the first (#1) to the fifth (#5) most versatile. For example, 380 trainers listed the Border Collie as the #1 most versatile breed.



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From the survey conducted with dog trainers, the top ten versatile breeds identified by trainers based on their training experience and perceptions can be seen in Figure 1.

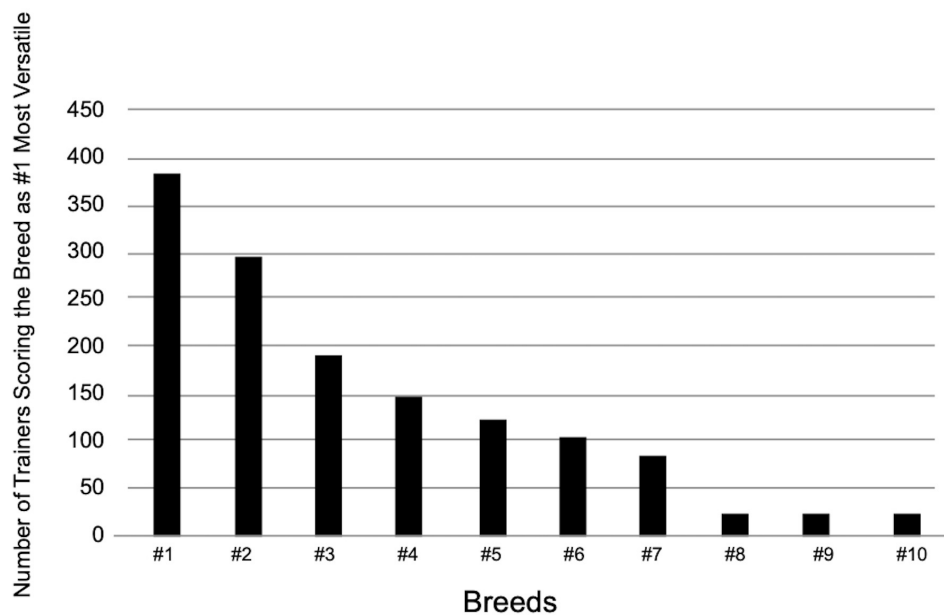


Figure 1. Trainer perceptions of the top 10 most versatile breeds (#1 Border Collie, #2 Labrador Retriever, #3 Golden Retriever, #4 German Shepherd Dog, #5 Poodle, #6 Australian Shepherd, #7 Belgian Malinois, #8 German Shorthaired Pointer, #9 Shetland Sheepdog, and #10 Doberman Pinscher).

Survey of Breed Experts

When the president and secretary of the breed’s national parent club for the top ten most versatile breeds (according to the Versatility Index) were contacted, they were asked via an email, 1) if they felt their breed was versatile, and 2) what characteristics of their specific breed help it succeed in a variety of sports?

Each expert commented only on their breed. Information from the breed experts of the top ten breeds provided additional insight into the versatility of all of the most ten versatile breeds. Specifically, the breed experts reported that the most common characteristics in their breed related to versatility were 1) a willingness to please, 2) intelligence, and 3) fun to work with and train. This was consistent across all ten breeds.

Versatility Index

The Versatility Index provided a quantitative, data-based answer to the question, “Which breeds are ranked as the most versatile?” In this study, versatility was defined as the breed earning a title in a variety of activities. Using the Versatility Index, the top ten ranked breeds are listed in Table 1. The



highest score in the Versatility Index was for the Belgian Tervuren (2.10). For a complete list of 134 breeds, see Appendix B.

Correlation Between Sport Success and Versatility

By focusing on the seven sport categories that had the greatest number of dogs participating, the following two questions were answered: 1) Does a breed's success in a particular sport indicate that it is more likely to have a higher Versatility Index, and 2) What is the degree of association between success in a particular sport and the breed being versatile? The seven sports evaluated to isolate and identify factors to develop the Versatility Index were: Agility, Obedience/Rally, Scent Work, ATT/Therapy, Conformation, Coursing, and Good Manners. The data from the titles that each breed earned in these sport categories were analyzed. The Pearson correlation of the Versatility Index and Obedience/Rally was the highest (0.83) showing that a high linear association exists between the Versatility Index and Obedience/Rally.

Figure 2 shows that of the seven sport categories on which the study focused, Obedience/Rally has the maximum association among the other sports (0.6087). The sport with the second most association is Coursing (0.3545). The degree of association for other sports includes Scent Work (0.2867), Conformation (0.1761), ATT/Therapy (0.0694), and Good Manners (0.0355). The sport with the least association is Agility (0.0031).

The results of this study show that some breeds that may not normally be

Ranking Most Versatile	Breed	Versatility Index
#1	Belgian Tervuren	2.10
#2	Field Spaniel	2.07
#3	Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever	2.03
#4	Belgian Sheepdog	2.00
#5	Beauceron	2.00
#6	Flat-Coated Retriever	1.96
#7	Border Terrier	1.94
#8	Bearded Collie	1.91
#9	Dalmatian	1.77
#10	Standard Schnauzer	1.73
Overall Average	134 breeds	1.41

Table 1. Versatility index ranked by breed



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expected to be the most versatile score higher on the Versatility Index. The results also show that dogs who earn Obedience/Rally titles are more likely to earn titles in other areas.

In this study, experienced trainers listed what they thought to be the ten most versatile breeds based on their experience. The Versatility Index was also used to identify the ten most versatile breeds based on AKC data of dogs who had earned AKC titles. There were no common breeds on these two lists (i.e., trainers and VI). The trainers identified breeds that were often recognized as versatile, but these breeds were not earning the most AKC titles by breed. The Versatility Index identified within the top ten breeds several breeds that were unexpected such as the Field Spaniel and Belgian Sheepdog. While these two breeds are athletic, because they are not so commonly seen at performance events, their appearance in the top ten most versatile breeds according to the VI was unforeseen. The Field Spaniel was ranked 2nd on the Versatility Index. The Field Spaniel is a sporting breed that is known to be docile in the home, but vigorous in the field. Recognized as an AKC breed in 1884, the Field Spaniel was ranked in popularity as 147 out of 202 breeds in 2023. However, the Versatility Index showed that in 2024, there were 595 Field Spaniels that had earned titles in 1,230 titling categories ($VI = 2.07$). This shows that a breed with a smaller number of dogs can score higher on the Versatility Index if there are owners choosing to participate in multiple sports with their dogs.

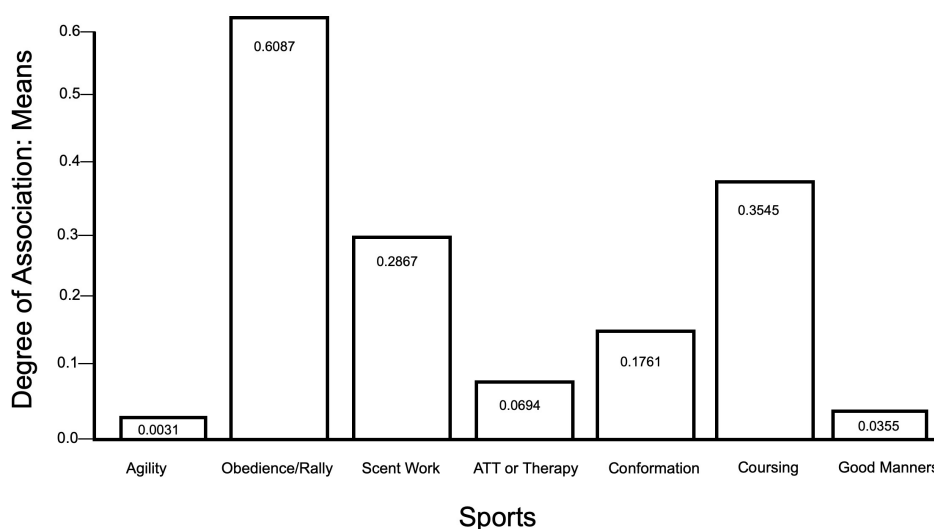


Figure 2. Association across sports



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DISCUSSION

The main goal of this study was to develop a Versatility Index designed to take into consideration the population of each breed and rank breeds that are successfully participating in multiple sports. Using the index, breeds can be ranked according to their versatility.

There is a general perception about certain breeds being the most versatile. There are references on the internet (Campasano, 2024) that list some of the most versatile breeds as the Jack Russell Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier, Standard Schnauzer, Bernese Mountain Dog, Border Collie, Golden Retriever, Labrador Retriever, German Shepherd Dog, Poodle, Australian Shepherd, Belgian Malinois, and Doberman Pinscher.

Of this group of breeds described on the internet as being versatile, when surveyed, experienced trainers listed eight of these breeds (Border Collie, Golden Retriever, Labrador Retriever, German Shepherd Dog, Poodle, Australian Shepherd, Belgian Malinois, and Doberman Pinscher) in their top ten of most versatile breeds along with the German Shorthaired Pointer and the Shetland Sheepdog.

However, both the internet listings and the trainer survey were not based on data and some breeds may be included simply because there are a larger number of dogs within the breed, and they are seen more frequently. Related to dog trainer beliefs about the “most versatile breeds” Helton (2010) referred to “perceived trainability.” The concept applies to versatility as well in that the versatility of breeds is often subjective and “perceived.”

Of the seven sports on which the study focused, dogs who earned Obedience/Rally titles were more likely to earn titles in other areas. One explanation for this is that Obedience/Rally provide the solid foundation for training in other sports. Obedience/Rally skills such as sit, down, stay, come, and perform reliably off leash are measures of the instructional control that is required for proficiency in most of the other sports. While there are no empirical studies that support the assertion that the transition to other sports from Obedience is easier, because Obedience teaches the dog the foundation skills needed for many other sports, this is a logical conclusion.

Two of the seven sports evaluated, Coursing and Scent Work, rely on the natural abilities of dogs to use their senses (i.e., Scent Work) and genetic tendency to chase prey (i.e., Coursing). Further, these activities teach dogs to think independently while at the same time, follow directions. Both thinking independently and following directions are skills required in other areas such as agility, herding and all the hunting sports.

Limitations

The title-based approach used in this study has the advantage of enabling the development of a quantitative versatility index, however the nature of the sports also introduces an element that may not be related to the versatility of the breed.

For example, Conformation involves a physical assessment of the dog (including structure, overall health, gait, and temperament) and owners often focus exclusively on this sport until dogs earn a championship. Once dogs have retired from Conformation, some earn other titles.

Good Manners was comprised of several non-competitive titles including AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy, Canine Good Citizen (CGC), AKC Community Canine, and



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Urban CGC. Many dog owners who participate in the Good Manners titles have the goal of having fun with their dogs in a relaxed setting and because they specifically do not want to compete, they may not go on to participate in multiple activities that would make the dog appear “versatile.”

The lowest degree of association with other sports was Agility. Agility is a comprehensive sport that offers many titles at an increasing level of difficulty. Appealing to handlers who want to engage in a physically active sport with their dogs, agility titles can be earned over a period lasting several years so that dogs involved in agility might not be earning large numbers of titles in other sports.

This study was restricted to the 134 breeds of the more than 200 AKC breeds. Breeds were selected only if they had at least 500 titles over the last 10 years, so some breeds that were smaller in numbers and thus being lower in the rankings of breeds, were not represented. As an example of a breed that did not have 500 titles, in 2025, the Sloughi was ranked 200 out of 202 breeds. The Sloughi is a hound breed that appears similar to the Greyhound. This breed was admitted to the AKC in 2016, so it could be that there was not enough time for it to become popular. The breed standard of the Sloughi says that the breed can be aloof and shy, so it could also be that this breed is not selected by owners for a variety of training activities because of temperament. Future research on why owners select breeds that are versatile vs. non-versatile is warranted.

There are some newer sports (e.g., Fit Dog and Fetch) that were not evaluated in this study. These are activities may have had an association with Good Manners and they could be evaluated in future research.

Another area to consider for future research is analyzing the agreement between trainer expectations and the Versatility Index.

CONCLUSIONS

The significance of this study is that it is the first and only study to quantify the versatility of more than 100 dog breeds. The most important finding relates to the Versatility Index which was used to present data on 134 dogs that had earned titles in a variety of sports. The VI showed that some breeds in the top ten most versatile breeds were unexpected (e.g., the Field Spaniel) and they were breeds that might not commonly be thought of as “versatile” by people other than their owners.

In this study, versatility was defined as the breed earning a title in a variety different activities or sports. There are other common characteristics of versatile dogs which include being adaptable and having the ability to adjust to new situations. Many versatile breeds can work when distractions are present (e.g., such as when birds are flying in a field nearby). Versatile breeds often have physical skills such as the ability to jump and run fast, and these skills lend themselves to the dog being successful at sports such as agility. Being successful in activities such as agility, herding, and the hunting sports also means that dogs can think independently and follow directions.

When studying versatility, it is also important to take the form and function of



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individual breeds into consideration. A heavy, giant breed would not be the best choice for a field or hunting event that required running and swimming long distances. A breed with very short legs (e.g., Dachshunds) may not be the best choice for a competitive sport that involves a lot of running or jumping unless the sport has scoring adjustments to accommodate specific breeds.

Secondary findings in this study came from the experienced dog trainer and breed expert surveys. Experienced dog trainers listed as the top ten most versatile breeds several popular breeds generally thought to be versatile such as the Golden Retriever. When ten breed experts were surveyed about their specific breeds, they all identified characteristics that included a willingness to please, intelligence, and fun to work with and train.

It must be noted that versatility depends on both the owner and the dog. Versatility is not simply a measure of what dogs are capable of doing, but also which sports owners choose to do with their dogs. A breed's Versatility Index can be raised if breed owners who see value in training and performance begin to participate in variety of sports.

In more recent years, research has addressed the topic of animal welfare. Animal welfare includes areas such as providing adequate nutrition and veterinary care. But animal welfare is so much more. To improve the welfare of dogs, socialization, behavioral health and physical health are also important. When dog owners spend time with their dogs and train for organized canine sports, the dog's welfare is improved through the exercise, enrichment, and the mental stimulation that comes from learning new skills. Canine welfare is also improved by the socialization opportunities that are present at dog sports. This socialization may be with people or other dogs. Training one's dog and participating in dog sports with a versatile dog can result in an owner having increased compassion and respect for the dog. Further, training and participating in multiple canine sports enhances the bond between the owner and dog, and it can provide both dogs and their owners with a higher quality of life.

Conflict of Interest Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics Statement

No ethical approval was required for this manuscript.

Data Availability

The complete statistical analysis of the data for the VI is available upon request.



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APPENDIX A

North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA) Breeds

Breed Name	
1 Blue Picardy Spaniel	18 Gordon Setter
2 Bracco Italiano	19 Irish Red & White Setter
3 Braque d'Auvergne	20 Irish Setter
4 Braque du Bourbonnais,	21 Large Munsterlander
5 Braque Francais	22 Perdiguero de Burgos
6 Braque St. Germain	23 Picardy Spaniel
7 Brittany	24 Pointer
8 Cesky Fousek	25 Portuguese Pointer
9 Drentsche Patrijshond	26 Pudelpointer
10 English Setter	27 Slovakian Wirehaired Pointer
11 Epagneul Breton	28 Small Munsterlander
12 Epagneul De Point Audemer	29 Spinone
13 Epagneul Dr Saint Usage	30 Stabyhoun
14 French Spaniel	31 Stichelhaar
15 German Longhair	32 Vizsla
16 German Shorthaired Pointer	33 Weimaraner
17 German Wirehaired Pointer	34 Wirehaired Pointing Griffon
	35 Wirehaired Vizsla



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APPENDIX B

Versatility Ranking of all Breeds with at Least 500 Titled Dogs Between 2014 and 2023

	Breed Name
1.	Belgian Tervuren
2.	Field Spaniel
3.	Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever
4.	Belgian Sheepdog
5.	Beauceron
6.	Flat-Coated Retriever
7.	Border Terrier
8.	Bearded Collie
9.	Dalmatian
10.	Standard Schnauzer
11.	Ibizan Hound
12.	Belgian Malinois
13.	Portuguese Water Dog
14.	Vizsla
15.	Weimaraner
16.	Cardigan Welsh Corgi
17.	Greater Swiss Mountain Dog
18.	Rhodesian Ridgeback
19.	Australian Cattle Dog
20.	Rottweiler
21.	Bouvier des Flandres
22.	Leonberger
23.	Miniature American Shepherd
24.	German Wirehaired Pointer
25.	Border Collie
26.	Welsh Springer Spaniel
27.	American Eskimo Dog
28.	Rat Terrier



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29.	Australian Shepherd
30.	Doberman Pinscher
31.	Cairn Terrier
32.	Pembroke Welsh Corgi
33.	Staffordshire Bull Terrier
34.	West Highland White Terrier
35.	Briard
36.	Samoyed
37.	Chesapeake Bay Retriever
38.	Giant Schnauzer
39.	Black Russian Terrier
40.	Collie
41.	Wirehaired Pointing Griffon
42.	Shetland Sheepdog
43.	Parson Russell Terrier
44.	Gordon Setter
45.	English Springer Spaniel
46.	Spinone Italiano
47.	Boykin Spaniel
48.	Bernese Mountain Dog
49.	Australian Terrier
50.	Saluki
51.	Keeshond
52.	Whippet
53.	Manchester Terrier
54.	Lagotto Romagnolo
55.	German Shorthaired Pointer
56.	Alaskan Malamute
57.	Norwegian Elkhound



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Versatility Ranking of all Breeds with at Least 500 Titled Dogs Between 2014 and 2023 (Cont.)

58.	American Staffordshire Terrier
59.	Greyhound
60.	Golden Retriever
61.	Irish Setter
62.	Borzoi
63.	English Cocker Spaniel
64.	Norfolk Terrier
65.	Schipperke
66.	Old English Sheepdog
67.	Wire Fox Terrier
68.	Basenji
69.	Clumber Spaniel
70.	Brittany
71.	Basset Hound
72.	Russell Terrier
73.	Siberian Husky
74.	Papillon
75.	English Setter
76.	Cane Corso
77.	Dachshund
78.	German Shepherd Dog
79.	Newfoundland
80.	Miniature Bull Terrier
81.	Xoloitzcuintli
82.	Pointer
83.	Bullmastiff
84.	Airedale Terrier
85.	Bloodhound
86.	Boxer



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Versatility Ranking of all Breeds with at Least 500 Titled Dogs Between 2014 and 2023 (Cont.)

87.	Great Pyrenees
88.	Boston Terrier
89.	Poodle
90.	Kerry Blue Terrier
91.	Akita
92.	Miniature Schnauzer
93.	Great Dane
94.	Shiba Inu
95.	Welsh Terrier
96.	Cavalier King Charles Spaniel
97.	Mastiff
98.	Cocker Spaniel
99.	Tibetan Terrier
100.	Irish Wolfhound
101.	Afghan Hound
102.	Smooth Fox Terrier
103.	St. Bernard
104.	Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier
105.	Toy Fox Terrier
106.	Bull Terrier
107.	Chinese Crested
108.	Norwich Terrier
109.	Miniature Pinscher
110.	Silky Terrier
111.	Italian Greyhound
112.	Havanese
113.	Chow Chow
114.	Labrador Retriever
115.	Dogue de Bordeaux



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APPENDIX B

Versatility Ranking of all Breeds with at Least 500 Titled Dogs Between 2014 and 2023 (Cont.)

116.	French Bulldog
117.	Scottish Terrier
118.	All American Dog
119.	Pug
120.	Bichon Frise
121.	Tibetan Spaniel
122.	Beagle
123.	Bulldog
124.	Brussels Griffon
125.	Yorkshire Terrier
126.	Pomeranian
127.	Chinese Shar-Pei
128.	Shih Tzu
129.	English Toy Spaniel
130.	Lhasa Apso
131.	Chihuahua
132.	Maltese
133.	Pekingese
134.	Japanese Chin



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