

Irish Wolfhound Temperament Then and Now

Dedicated to the memory of my mentor, Sheelagh Seale, Ballykelly Irish Wolfhounds; One of the Greatest Breeders of all time.

It is a great honor to be invited here to speak on the temperament of our beloved breed.

I'd first like to tell you a little bit about myself. I have been breeding Irish Wolfhounds for 35 years. My Kennel name Carrickaneena is taken from the name of my Grandfather's and in turn my father's farm in Co. Louth, Ireland.

My family goes back 3 generations in the breed that I know of. My Grand Uncle, Patrick Kehoe of Riverdale House, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford bred Irish Wolfhounds in the early 1900's, in partnership with Mr. P. Doyle. Together they produced some fine hounds that won consistently at the dog shows. My father owned several Irish Wolfhounds but never bred them.

I have been in love with this breed for most of my life, and to me they are part of my Heritage as well as my passion. There are few things in life that make your heart sing -- The Irish Wolfhound does it for me!!

In opening, I would like to call your attention to the long association of the Irish & Norse peoples. We know that the Vikings were in Ireland before they colonized Iceland or Greenland & that in 841 Dublin was founded by the Vikings. They exchanged ideas, culture, goods and of course the Irish Wolfhound. The Ancient Norse peoples not only knew of the Irish Wolfhound, they clearly loved the breed and understood intimately his temperament as well. For, handed down in Norse literature to us through the passage of over 1,000 years, is one of the most

compelling and touching descriptions of our beloved hounds ever written.

The Saga of Burnt Njal tells us that Olaf, the son of an Irish Princess, offers his friend Gunnar a hound.

“ I will give thee a dog which I got in Ireland

He is huge of limb and for a follower equal to an able man,

Moreover, he hath man's wit and will bark at thine enemies but

Never at thy friends

And he will know by each man's face whether he be ill or well

Disposed to thee

And he will lay down his life for thee.”

Olaf then tells Gunnar the hound's name, Samr, and bids Samr to follow Gunnar. Afterwards, when Gunnar's enemies plot to kill him, they kill Samr first.

The saga highlights aspects of Irish Wolfhound character, which should be recognized as typical by everyone in the room – And hopefully valued so highly that it is an important consideration in the selection of breeding stock. This is by far the best description of the correct IW temperament. It so powerfully imparts to us the nature of the hound – love, intelligence, size, power, ability to discriminate and think, courage and loyalty even unto death. One thousand years later, I find it hard to improve upon.

To begin the discussion on the temperament of the Irish Wolfhound, I believe that it will be worthwhile to take a moment and go over some background information that will become important later on. Before we can understand the temperament of this creature that we all know and love, we must truly understand the Irish Wolfhound. That means we must comprehend its function – its role in life – its relations with man, or, if you will, its place in the world. I am not telling anyone in this room anything new when I say that the Irish Wolfhound has a long history with man going

back 2000 years, or that historically its traditional roles were that of hunter, warrior, protector & companion of the family. This required an animal with a wide range of skills and the temperament to successfully carry them out; An animal with courage, loyalty, obedience and the instinct and ability to kill while hunting dangerous predators, or aiding his Master in the conduct of war; An animal that could then turn around and display obedience, gentleness, and loyal love of family and children, while protecting them from harm at home. Thus the old saying "Gentle when stroked, Fierce when provoked."

Today, not too many of our hounds do much hunting beyond chasing the odd rabbit or squirrel. Modern machines of warfare have removed them from the battlefield. Some hounds are still involved in sport, either lure coursing or live game coursing which allows them to put some of their hunting skills to use. However, we keep these ancient hounds now primarily for the pleasure of their company. We exhibit them at dog shows, go for walks in parks, runs on beaches and watch television with them at our side. Their primary function today is as companion. The world has changed a lot over the last two Millennia and so has the Irish Wolfhound's place in it. However, it is very important that we always remember that despite all of the changes around him, the Irish Wolfhound remains the same dog he was in the past, and indeed should always be so. "If he is not Bran, then he is Bran's brother."

Temperament in the Irish Wolfhound is a big topic, and it is, by its very nature, relatively subjective. It is likely that every one of us will differ slightly in our perceptions of what exactly constitutes correct temperament, and in return just how serious is a specific temperament fault in any given dog. However, I do believe that there are some truths that are non-negotiable, although perhaps the degrees can be debated. The first place to look for information about our breed should always be the Standard. While no mention

is directly made regarding temperament, there is a clue as to what its framers intended. Under the heading "General Appearance" we are told that this dog should be of "Great Size and Commanding Appearance." The words "Commanding Appearance" are both vague and highly descriptive at the same time. While not a detailed account of temperament, it does, if we think about it, say quite a bit. For if a hound has "Commanding Appearance" he cannot be a frightened hound. He is not a dog afraid of strangers, nor is he a fawning idiot slobbering on anyone who happens by. He cannot be an aggressive hound, which attacks or growls without cause. This is a hound with discretion. He has an interest in new people and situations, but a certain aloofness as well, and the intellect and that something extra – that intangible, undefinable something which allows him to behave accordingly – with "Commanding Appearance". Near the end of the 19th century, Mr. R.D. O'Brien wrote to Father Hogan describing hounds, which he had known in the past. "presence about all these earlier dogs which was the true stamp of the breed to those who could recognize it. (Sic) I had a very fine bitch, brave and faithful, with the best head I have ever seen, but she had not that presence." It is a complex combination of courage and caution, friendliness and aloofness, gentleness and backbone, along with instinct and intellect, plus that "certain Presence" which constitute correct temperament and set this breed apart.

Unfortunately, not all of our beloved Irish Wolfhounds have this ideal temperament. There are several deviations from the norm, which can and do occur in our breed, and now I will talk about the most serious of them – aggression. Aggression is the most serious fault in temperament because it is potentially so dangerous. It can show itself in distinct forms: Aggression toward people, toward dogs, toward other animals such as livestock or pets or in combinations of the above. Dogs can be naturally or genetically aggressive, or Man-made aggressive – created by the owner.

The least seen type of behavior in our breed, thank God, is the hound that is aggressive towards people. Historically, Father Hogan mentions a case from 1733 in which “an Irish Wolfdog of uncommon size” attacked the child of its owner. We are given no real details as to why, however, perhaps Rabies was the cause, as Hogan got the reference from a treatise on “Canine Madness”. Apart from this sole entry, I did not find mention of unwarranted attacks by Irish Wolfhounds on people. On the contrary, I did find numerous descriptions of this breeds loyalty, fidelity, courage and great devotion towards humans. This tells us that the hound that is aggressive toward people has always been a rarity.

Today, as in the past, the thought of a people aggressive Irish Wolfhound is frightening, but sadly, it does happen, and I’m sure many of you have seen dogs of this nature. This is a temperament we must all guard against. Breeders in particular must not make excuses for “The Great Dog” with the nasty temperament. We all have a responsibility to the breed first !! While we love each individual dog, our love of the breed must prevail. The dog who is aggressive to people, unless in proper defense of its owner or itself should be eliminated from any breeding program, its ancestors investigated & the offending animal humanely euthanized. I have had two experiences with this type of behavior & will relate them later should anyone be interested.

Another type of aggression, which can occur in our breed, is the hound that is aggressive toward other dogs. History gives us many references to hounds, which were placed in organized fights against Mastiffs – with varying results. Some won, some lost and at least one ran away. All that this tells us is that the Irish Wolfhound, which was never meant to be a pit fighting dog, has been put into some pretty dangerous situations over the centuries by stupid people. Perhaps more enlightening however, Father Hogan gives us numerous examples of early writers who cite the breed’s indifference, tolerance, or even kindness toward other

dogs. This, we may conclude then, was the Irish Wolfhound's more typical behavior towards other dogs in the past. It certainly makes sense when we remember that this breed has never lived in a vacuum, and has always been a part of the family and larger community. He would have to have possessed the ability to get along.

In the modern world, the same thing is true. The outright aggressive dog is unacceptable. He or she is a liability to the owner as well as to the breed. This animal should be neutered. (which may or may not correct the problem.) While this is a type of behavior I do not like or encourage, we must remember we are dealing with "Dogs." There are many reasons for what may be perceived by some as aggressive behavior. Not all displays of aggression mean the dog is a bad dog. Dogs have a right to defend themselves. They also have a right to dislike another dog. Most incidents of aggression at ringside for example – are usually caused by owners not in control or their dogs.

The third type of aggression in our hounds that I would like to address is that which is directed towards livestock or other animals. This is not so much an unwarranted aggressive behavior as it is an instinct to hunt, which was bred for selectively over many hundreds of years. Irish Wolfhounds have a very strong instinct to pursue game, and consequently, there have probably been unfortunate incidents with livestock (which are perceived as prey) for as long as there have been Irish Wolfhounds. Captain Graham tells of two hounds belonging to the Knight of Kerry, which escaped their enclosure and killed a horse.

The fact that we have entered the 21st century has not changed this inborn instinct to hunt. The Irish Wolfhound is still the same dog – they will kill livestock, deer, small game, and even cats. This surprises people who don't understand their hunting instinct. This is much less a fault in the dog than in the owner.

Now that I have talked about aggression and its different forms, I would like to explore one of its important causes. That is aggression, which is owner caused. All humans in every generation prior to this last one or two lived in a society that was fundamentally different from the one in which we live now. In general, people were more in tune with animals. Most had daily contact with the horses that provided transportation, the livestock kept for food, or wild animals that were hunted. Historically, people that kept Irish Wolfhounds often hunted and rode. They had insight into their hounds' behavior and appreciated their many capabilities. An example of this type of owner was Mrs. Benyon (Bournstream Kennels). Between the wars, three of her hounds drove off a lion that they encountered while walking in the bush in Kenya. They also hunted Impala, Duiker and they even killed a Wart Hog. She was very proud of them and their hunting abilities. Yet she also observed with pride that they were, "excellent guards, especially at night, very brave in defense of their friends, not quarrelsome with other dogs, very devoted to and fond of children, and they hunt by nose as well as sight." She saw the Whole Dog !!

Some people nowadays don't understand the historical role of the Irish Wolfhound and its impact on temperament to this day. This is how hounds get into trouble when owners, who can't conceive that their gentle dogs would ever harm a fly, allow them to get too close to livestock or the neighbor's cat. Then they find out the hard way that the hunting instinct is alive and well in the breed. Just because they are gentle with the baby, doesn't mean they won't go after the cat.

Another owner caused aggression problem is caused by the inherent language barrier between dogs and men. Some people don't "speak dog" They don't understand the wordless body language, which conveys dominance, submission, anger, joy, etc. These dogs communicate on a level beyond us & unless we pay

attention, we miss the most fascinating aspects of their character & personalities. Years ago, my pack leader, a bitch called Nellie, ruled my pack her entire life without ever putting a tooth in another dog. One look from her corrected any behavior in the pack deemed unacceptable by her. She was a treasure & I miss her so.

One of the negative results of this total breakdown of communication between hound and owner is the creation of what I call the "Pig Dog". This is the dog that behaves badly but the owner is oblivious. Because the owner of this offensive dog is unable to read their hound's signals and properly interpret their meaning, the dog is allowed to continue his obnoxious behavior. An example of pig dogs are dogs that rush up to other dogs at ringside or elsewhere, dogs that stand over dogs lying down at ringside, dogs that with body language challenge others. Then when the dog that previously was minding his or her own business responds, usually with a growl – they are looked at as the bad ones. Not so!! For example - I was standing at ringside waiting for judging to begin. I was showing 2 bitches on that day, Nellie & Cait. Two dogs rushed up to Cait & draped their necks over her back. Cait said nothing but looked to Nellie, her pack leader for help. All was silent up to this point. Nellie emitted one of those growls that come from the toes. The 2 offenders knew exactly what she meant & backed off. No blood was shed – but Nellie was considered the bad tempered dog. The owner of the offending dogs believed they were just trying to make friends. She had no conception of what her dogs were about.

A related owner-caused problem is that in which owners inadvertently reinforce or encourage bad behavior. This also stems from garbled communication between humans and dogs. – Here we would have the dog that initiates aggression toward another dog. The owner, instead of correcting the dog sharply & letting him know this is unacceptable, reaches out & pets the dog. What has he just done? He has rewarded & reinforced bad behavior.

That dog will do it again & again because he now knows, this is what his owner wants him to do. Who do you think is smarter dog or owner ?

Additionally, some owners simply are not in control. There are dogs that will defend a weak owner. Sometimes it is hard to recognize this unless you know all parties concerned. Our dogs are pack animals and every pack needs a leader. When the owner is not in control, the dog feels he must take charge. He feels the owner's needs & insecurities & behaves accordingly. If you think about this, you will realize you know at least one person who fits into this category.

Besides aggression problems which stem from owner ineptitude there are, of course, other causes such as Genetics and Medical conditions which both play a role. Genetically, temperament is inherited, just like any other trait, some being more dominant than others. I feel aggression is more likely to be passed on than not and this is why we must be ever mindful of the traits and good qualities displayed by the ancestors & close relatives of those dogs we include in our breeding programs. There are also medical reasons why a dog may exhibit aggressive behavior - and they would be too numerous to mention here. But it is advisable that a normal dog who becomes short tempered or snappy be thoroughly examined by a qualified Veterinarian before any decision is made about his future.

Shyness is another temperament problem in Irish Wolfhounds. Some dogs are just naturally shy. Others become shy because of some bad experience or lack of socialization. When too many dogs are kept in either large kennels or large packs without sufficient numbers of people present to give them individual attention, you will see a tendency to shyness. We read in some of the old interviews, by Bill Siggers of Ouborough Kennels that this happened in England between the wars, when the

large kennels could not get enough help. At the same time, because of the wars, and the resulting loss of so many of their dogs, the Gene pool was dangerously reduced. When the two American dogs Ch Rory of Kihone and Ch Cragwood Barney O'Shea were imported to England to bring new blood and expand the gene pool, their effect on temperament as well as conformation was a God send. We see this tendency to shyness in some of the large kennels of today. This would fall under the category of owner-caused, as would lack of socialization.

Shyness is very difficult to categorize as we see some pups and even some older dogs go through shy stages. You may see them one month & they are shy & the next a happy puppy again. So I find it hard to penalize shyness in young dogs. There are also degrees of shyness – from the one who withdraws slightly, to the one who becomes hysterical in its efforts not to be touched, and all degrees in between. Certainly it is not a behavior we want to encourage, as it is totally untypical for our breed. There is nothing “Commanding” about a shy dog. Although many categorize shyness as a form of aggression, I disagree with this theory. I am not saying that I encourage this type of behavior – but through socialization & proper breeding it can be eliminated, as was proven in England, with the introduction of the American outcrosses.

As I stated previously, Irish Wolfhound temperament is a big subject. I realize that I have not deeply detailed every aspect of this important topic. That was not the intent of this brief lecture. I have, however, tried to cover the major points of our breed's temperament as it was in the past, and as I observe it today. I do believe that it bears repeating to everyone, but especially to the breeders, that temperament is of primary importance in our hounds. Whatever it was that attracted you to this breed initially, size or whatever, probably the reason that you have stayed, is because of the Magic of the typical temperament. Remember that

no matter how physically beautiful a show specimen may be, without the typical temperament – that dog can never truly be a real Irish Wolfhound.

I opened my lecture this evening with an Old Norse saga, which has always meant a great deal to me. Despite its great age, it accurately describes dogs that I know and cherish today in my own kennel. Now I will close with an Old Irish Legend, which gives the origins of the first Irish Wolfhounds. I like this story because it tries to explain the unexplainable – the something extra, that intangible quality O'Brien referred to as "Presence."

"The Irish Wolfhound's origin, according to legend, is unique. The hero Fionn Mac Cumall had an Aunt who had the misfortune to be turned for a time into a hound by an enemy. Her nephew succeeded in having her restored but was not able to effect this in the case of her twin children, who had been born while their mother was under the enchantment and so had never lived in human shape; they remained hounds and became his inseparable companions, Bran and Sceolaun, the first Irish Wolfhounds." This version of the legend was written by Delphis Gardner, who comments about it, "Anyone who really knows an Irish Wolfhound will understand what is meant by this legend; that strength of personality, that constancy and mental grasp, which distinguish this greatest of hounds, are the stuff not of men merely, but of Heroes."

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