

HOW THE IRISH WOLFHOUND APPEARS TO HAVE CHANGED TO MY EYES OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS

Ladies and gentlemen, when Willy Hasselbrink informed me that Betty Murphy had volunteered me to air my views on 'short legs in Irish Wolfhounds' I have to admit that my thoughts were unrepeatable. However, after consideration I decided that I would take advantage of the opening and put my views on paper and hope that they will be of interest to others, I also took the opportunity to extend the range of the talk to other things besides short legs.

First I would like to make it very clear that every reference to 'short legs' does not refer to 'small' as opposed to 'tall' hounds, it refers to the fact that, in my opinion, there are now wolfhounds exhibited at shows who unfortunately have short legs in proportion to their length of body, in other words, these hounds are unbalanced and are in fact poor representatives of the breed. If this trend continues then in 40 years time it is more than likely that you will be looking at quite a different type of wolfhound to that envisaged by Captain Graham and the other wolfhound devotees of 100/130 years ago.

It is very easy to make statements such as these, however, to convince of their truth is a different matter, but I will do my best as this is very important.

Let us first consider the Breed Standard, I make apologies for using today the Breed Standard in the more or less unaltered form in which it had existed for 100 years until, in my view, it was mutilated by the Kennel Club. (o/h projection No.1) This as you can see still contained the references to the Great Dane, Greyhound and the Deerhound, the Kennel Club did not feel these were needed, however they give a far easier to understand and visualise description of the wolfhound than a page of words. The references to weight and height decrees that hounds below these minimums should be excluded from exhibition. The Kennel Club in its wisdom originally included the statement in their new Breed Standard that these 'minimums' were the 'ideal'. It took the Club almost 5 years to get this corrected. Who can tell what damage was caused by this error, all I can say is that it is now quite easy to be embarrassed when watching the Hound Group at our large Championship Shows when the Irish Wolfhound Best of Breed, supposedly the largest and tallest of the galloping hounds is very little taller than the Saluki of Afghan and can have such fine bones and body that it is mistaken for a Deerhound.

This however could be just tolerated if the hound is a properly balanced hound, unfortunately this is not always the case, there is now a quite definite trend for wolfhounds with lovely deep bodies and long length of loin to appear in the show ring, and win. If one looks very carefully at them and compares then with other hounds which have the same body length but are apparently lacking in dept of chest one finds that both animals have in fact the same dept of chest, the hound which appears to have a deep chest will in fact be about 2/3 cm smaller than the other one, usually it is the bone between the pastern and the elbow which is not as long as that of the same bone in the taller animal, this is also often accompanied by a somewhat short upper arm. At the other end of the hound we now find that the pride people took in having 'well angulated' hind legs has led the what in my opinion is over angulation of the joint between the thigh and second thigh. For legs like these to work without bumping into the forelegs the hound has to either place its hind feet alongside the front ones (crabbing) or, if combined with short boned front legs the hound can cope. Has careful breeding from hounds which can cope with the difficulty of moving with overangulated hind legs produced what I feel are unbalanced wolfhounds? (o/h projection No. 2) As you can see from this List of Points in Order of Merit No. 5 has 'forelegs heavily boned' which does not agree with the fine boned hounds I mentioned earlier, and No. 6 has 'stifles slightly bent' which does not accord with the over angulation we now see so frequently, please note however, I do not advocate straight hind legs, that is just as bad.

The movement of an apparently deep chested, long bodied hound with excessively angulated hind legs looks to be, and is, a nice flowing driving action, but is this the movement of a galloping sight hound? Is not the 'bouncy' lope of the deerhound more typical?

I would now like to introduce you to 'the Points of the Irish Wolfhound'. Captain Graham had his own idea of what a wolfhound should be like and he endeavoured to breed to achieve this. He gave the various points of the hound a value. The total being 100 for a perfect hound.

In 1902 the membership of the Club were balloted in an attempt to define the characteristics of the breed for the benefit of people who knew nothing about it but were interested. These two lists were quite comparable, as one would expect. In 1989/90, at a judging seminar run by the Club a group of 12 Championship Show judges together with 18 aspiring judges carried out a rerun of the 1902 ballot. (o/h projection No. 3) As you can see, after 90 years judges and breeders appear to place less stress on 'Head' 'Coat' and 'Forlegs' and more on 'Substance' and 'Symetry' than in 1902. One certainly does not see as many hounds in the 35/36 inch range as one did three decades ago. Also there is now a very definite trend to strip out a large proportion of a hounds coat, I am told that this is to improve the appearance of the hound and to enable its good points to be more readily seen, in other words, remove 10% of the hounds 'Points' to enable a judge to see the rest, regardless of the fact that the judge should be able to assess all the hounds attributes, even when it is in full coat. By all means tidy up the straggley and untidy areas but please don't denude the neck and body as some do.

The Breed Standard and List of Points form a 'word picture' of what an Irish Wolfhound should look like. At the Club Rally in 1983 our late chairman, Mrs Helen Baird, gave a talk to those present on the Breed Standard and how she, as an individual, interpreted it. The whole of this talk was reproduced in our year book at that time because the editor felt that it was the most comprehensive interpretation of the Standard in existence. I have taken the liberty of using her section on 'General Appearance' today. (attachment) You will note her views on 'Coat' in the second paragraph and in the third and fourth paragraphs her reference to size, and that most important factor of all 'the balance of the proportions of the hound'. This is again stressed in the fifth paragraph. Mrs Baird sets out far more clearly than I can that short legged, long bodied wolfhounds are unbalanced and they are therefore unrepresentative of the breed.

To stress the point about balance I have brought a set of 50 photographs of old wolfhound champions, they date from roughly the early 1900s to the 1930s. From the point of view of balanced hounds, they range in height from 31/32" (80cm) to 37 1/2" (95cm) but I think you will all agree that in general all of them have a similar height to body length ratio. If any of you would like to guess which are the tallest ones, I will tell you if you are correct.

I am afraid that I have strayed 'short legs' but hope that you all now appreciate that they do in fact destroy the balance of the hound. It is difficult to pinpoint the reason for the problem, one possibility is that when the wolfhound was being 'reborn' in Grahams days, the later half of the nineteenth century, until the late 1930s breeders usually kept large numbers of hounds, unbalance or poor specimens were neither shown nor bred from as they did conform to the vision of the standard. From the late 60s onwards more and more people began to keep wolfhounds but not in the large numbers as did the earlier breeders. In a kennel of 3, 4 or 5 hounds the breeder evidently cannot afford not to show and sell all they breed, how often have we heard of people whose every litter is 100% show stock? To be really cynical are we nowadays breeders or producers?

Have judges (or some of them) become used to unbalanced hounds? I will give you two recent quotations, firstly a breeder and Ch. Show judge who when talking about this problem agreed that it was wrong but 'as judges awarded these hounds top honours we should breed to it' secondly, one agreed that a particular hound was too short on legs, 'but does it matter, it wins'.

It is a difficult problem, it will not go away by itself, it will in fact get worse, it is up to you, breeders and judges, who are both in a position to deal with it, to set out to correct the problem. Breeders should aim to breed wolfhounds which confirm to the Standard, not to try to win at any price.

Judges should look very carefully and remember that balance is very, very important, but don't throw the baby out with the bath water.

Possibly I am wrong to include this last point but I feel it sums up the whole subject. In a recent critique the judges preamble was as follows, 'I found ribcages to be appalling. Where has the lovely long ribbing gone? Many exhibits, because of this fault, were too long through the loin with the result that back ends were weak and front assemblies in consequence were carrying too much muscles as that was the part of the dog taking the strain'.

Thanks for listening.

John Briggs, June 1996

Also attached

[Standard of Excellence](#)

[List of Points in Order of Merit](#)

[Values attributed to the Points](#)

[General Appearance](#)

[Mrs H. Bairds Notes on the Breed Standard](#)

[Breed Standard \(pre 1902\)](#)

[Irish Wolfhound Club Standard \(pre 1981\)](#)

[Comments made by Dagmar Kenis in her critique at a show in America on the movement of Irish Wolfhounds](#)

Additional inscribed points during the talk

When referring to the Points in Order of Merit, specific mention was made about No. 6, namely 'Stifles slightly bent'.

During discussion afterwards Betty Murphy referred to the fact that in the Irish Clubs version this item was 'Stifles nicely bent'. She felt this was the correct wording. I made a counter suggestion that both versions left a lot to be desired, 'slightly' could be taken to mean almost straight, whilst 'nicely' had no definite interpretation. In my opinion a better word would be 'moderately' a word already used in Point No. 11 and 13 referring to feet and breadth of chest.

When referring to the fact that the wolfhound was a galloping hound (end of the 4th paragraph on page 1) I drew a parallel between the wolfhound and the horse, stressing that the wolfhound was not a racehorse, nor was it a shire or draught horse, but that it was more akin to the Cleveland Bay, the heavy hunter type of horse, like the old heavy cavalry horses, well built, plenty of bone, lots of hard muscle and able to keep going in rough difficult country. One type of horse it certainly does not resemble is a 'trotter'.

About 10 days after the talk I received a copy of the June 1996 Norwayian Club Magazine, in it was the following excerpt.

'A firm stand must be made against awarding prizes to hounds that are not *absolutely sound* as the breed is essentially a *galloping* one and meant for *rough* as well as *fast* work and therefore *coat*, *soundness of limb* and *freedom of action* must be insisted on. *Girth* is also most essential, as without it, the necessary lung and heart action is impossible. It therefore behoves all judges of this breed to see that the unsound hound never receives a place in any class, it being much better to make *no award* than to give a prize to a hound that may be largely used for perpetuating cripples.'

The writer of [this paragraph](#) was Captain Graham. It does make one realise that for over 100 years it has been and still is a never ending battle against unsoundness, lack of substance and mediocrity and still unsound, unbalanced hounds are highly placed by 'experts'.

In view of the report in the Breed Notes of 'OurDogs' dated July 26th I feel I have to point out that at no time have I suggested that it would be desirable to produce tall, fine boned wolfhounds with weak back legs. All I have put forward is the suggestion that breeders should aim to produce strong, substantial, well balanced sound wolfhounds and that judges should make their awards with these things in mind.