

(Congress 1996 – Castrop-Rauxel)

## Muscle Tone and Function in the Irish Wolfhound

by

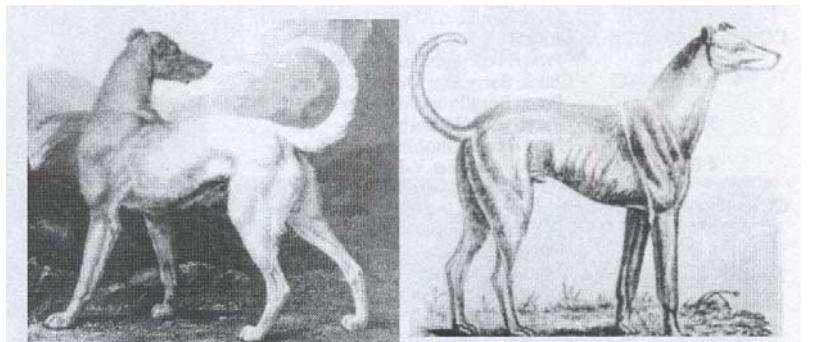
Jette Holm Jensen, Denmark

Anyone now expecting a scientific report on muscle function in the dog will be disappointed. This is merely a subjective layman's presentation, based on 23 years of observations and experience with a large number of Irish Wolfhounds.

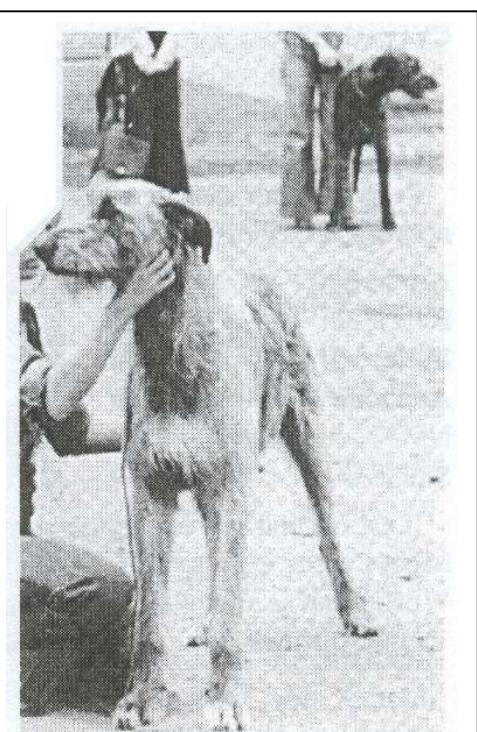
There is a saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. To save myself a lot of writing, and you a lot of reading and still get the picture this presentation is basically 25'000 words worth of pictures with comments.

Once upon a time Irish Wolfhounds were working animals having to earn their living by running, fighting and killing. When we look at these 200 years old drawings it is obvious that they were very capable of doing so. In fact, to me they look much like Bullterriers in a Greyhound shape. Compared with present day ideals they have ugly heads and a horrible tail carriage but behold their muscled and sense of power and activity oozing from these animals. Imagine the sight of them flying up and down hills, pulling big game to the ground. It must have been like watching lions hunt. Try to imagine what they must have felt like under the hands – hard as concrete with muscles of steel. When they were not working they had the pleasure of a fit and functional body, allowing them to run and play and do all the things a strong and healthy Wolfhound likes to do.

As we all know Irish Wolfhounds went out of work a long time ago to become pet and show dogs. To preserve the breed as it once was the Standard of Excellence was written more than a century ago and still stands. The Standard requires "muscle" 5 times, "power" once, "strong" 4 times and mentions lack of muscle as a fault.



Some Irish Wolfhounds of the past : the look and feel of iron and steel



Some Irish Wolfhounds of the presents

Now, have we in fact managed to preserve the breed as a powerful big game hunter? How often do you see this amount of muscle, power and agility in the Wolfhound conformation ring? I can speak only for myself, but I haven't seen a great many Wolfhounds that I would trust being able to put steaks on my table and keep big bad wolves and other beasts off the premises.

Many present day Irish wolfhounds are stylish but weedy dogs, streamlined, curvy and elegant. You can search their bodies all day and you will find neither substance nor muscle, rather they have the look and feel of cooked leeks.

Some of these limp Wolfhounds float around the ring with ease and grace, which is easy to fall for – I am myself a sucker for good movers – but quite often their stride lacks power and they are just lucky that they have only to manage the circumference of the ring once or twice.



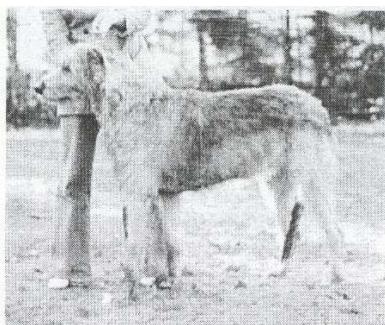
and one Greyhound

It has been said that the Irish Wolfhound should be as powerful as it is compatible with the Greyhound conformation. I couldn't agree more, but looking at those presented it is obvious that none of the Wolfhounds – despite several being Champions – match the pet Greyhound in muscle tone or power.

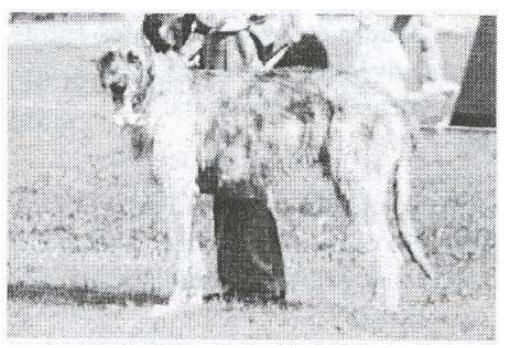
The Standard requires the Irish Wolfhound to be "of great size and commanding appearance", which most Wolfhounds live up to.

However, it doesn't say that the Wolfhound should be a mountain of flesh that rolls all over his body as he lumbers along at a laborious or inefficient trot. Nevertheless, this is an appropriate description of a lot of

present day Wolfhounds, some of which are even loaded with a champion title. I am not talking about fatness here, I am talking about dogs having or not having firm flesh. Firm dogs may be quite heavy, even fat without looking like pork or having their flesh rolling all over them.



More Irish Wolfhounds of the present



Remember, the Wolfhound is a sighthound and a hunter and it is not at all necessary to sacrifice the Greyhound shape to maintain size, substance and power.

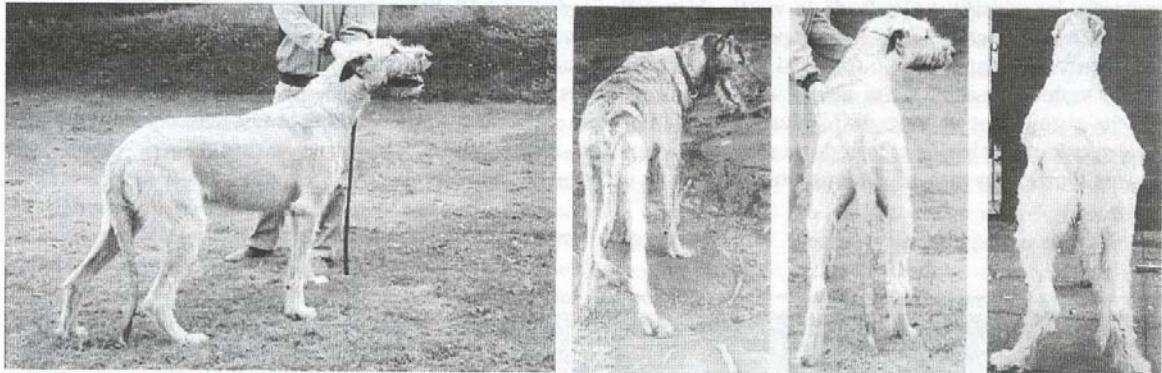
Whatever we use the dog for, "the first requisite of his service is that he must be alive, for little pleasure can be derived from a dead dog. The next is that he must move. Movement which reduces itself to gait, is the

prime agent governing the result of his service". These wise words were said by Mr McDowell Lyon in his book "The Dog in Action".

The hindquarters are the engine that drives the dog, they are responsible for the major part of his movement and like many others I consider them the most important single part of the dog.

Indeed the Irish Wolfhound may in size and majesty be compared to a Rolls Royce, but unfortunately most Wolfhounds seem to be – at best – equipped with the motor of a medium sized family car to drive their huge bodies. What a Wolfhound should have is a well greased 400 h.p. engine to fit his size

and weight and take him smoothly and comfortably anywhere he needs to go. In the dog such an engine has the form of hard, well developed muscles making the rear look rounded and slightly bandy-legged.



Hindquarters – the engine of the dog

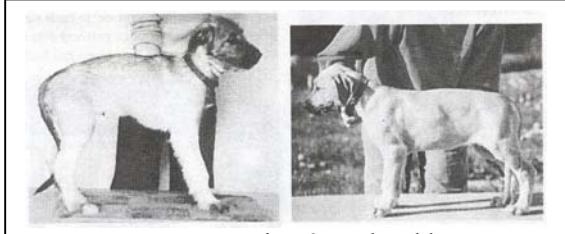


Muscle tone differs right from puppyhood : three puppies, 5 months old...

Remember that the Irish Wolfhound is a hunter – first, last and always – the Standard describes him as such and he needs to function as such to be typical of the breed and to make the most of his own life.

Condition and muscle tone depends on the amount of exercise a dog gets, but there is more to it than that. Puppies are born with different dispositions. Some are loose and wobbly while others are muscular and well co-ordinated right from the time they get up on their legs. It has nothing to do with the amount of weight the puppy is carrying.

Weak and wobbly puppies are very vulnerable. They don't tolerate exercise very well and have to be kept at rest, maybe even confined most of the time. What a miserable puppy-hood for a little guy wanting to enjoy his life!



... two puppies, 9 weeks old

The strong, muscular puppy can walk stairs, go for walks, romp and play with other puppies and dogs. Moreover, dogs with well developed rear muscling are less prone to develop hip dysplasia. Isn't that what we all want for our puppies? All it takes is careful selection of their sires and dams.

#### SO WHAT?

Irish Wolfhounds no longer have to earn their living by hunting for themselves or their masters. They get daily free meals and many rarely or never get the chance of having a free gallop, so what difference does it make if they have muscle or not? Surely many judges couldn't care less so good condition won't even improve show results.

It is true that the Wolfhound's life no longer depends on his hunting skills and the selection of breeding stock has diverged from "survival of the fittest". That is why the Standard was set up – to maintain the breed in its original shape when natural selection took a back seat. Well, if we ignore the Standard's demand for a muscular, powerful, athletic dog because these qualities are not needed

anymore then why bother with the Standard at all? Dark eyes, rose ears, long necks etc. are not necessities either – except they make good show results, which seem to be all that counts.

What about the dog himself? Does it matter to him if he is strong and muscular or not? No one having watched a powerful, well conditioned dog in action can doubt the answer. Running and playing is one of the major pleasures a dog has in his life and the life of an Irish Wolfhound is already too short. We ought to be ashamed of breeding dogs too weak to enjoy an active, functional life from puppy-hood to senior years or dogs so heavy and beef cattle like that their old age starts a 4. Not only do we deprive the dog of life quality, we also deprive ourselves of the pleasure of owning a dog who is happy and agile through most or all of his life. All it takes is consideration – in the show ring and the selection of breeding stock – not just for the two-dimensional smashing silhouette but rather for the three-dimensional functional dog.