

Explanation of the Breed Standard

by Helen Baird

The first breed standard was drawn up in 1885 by Captain Graham and the members of the newly formed Irish Wolfhound Club. Before that, Irish Wolfhounds had been bred for their hunting skills, but with wolves being long since gone, the need to breed more Irish Wolfhounds went too.

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The standard they compiled is basically the same as the one we use today. Recently the K.C. made us change the wording of the "General Appearance" and some slight additions have been made over the years.

The Irish Greyhound

Engraved after Reinagle 1803

This is the picture that modern breeders have taken as a model. The original is in the possession of Mr. Monatgue Scott and shows a very pale wheaten or whitish hound against a background of mountains in the true soft Irish colours - a beautiful bit of work. It has been suggested that it was painted from one of Lord Altamont's crossbred hounds from the "Mastiff Wolfdog" and "Greyhound Wolfdog" strains



Captain Graham kept in mind the ancient hunting dogs when making up the standard and referred to the Reinagle painting of The Irish Wolfdog, done in 1800. Of it, he said "It is what the Irish Wolfhound was and should be." He also calls it "A remarkably spirited drawing which though faulty in some minor parts, gives us an admirable idea of what this grand dog was." The "spirited drawing" could be reference to the high sweep of the tail and of the minor faults. He thought the back should be longer and it should have more coat and whiskers. If it could put its tail down and the minor faults could be corrected, I think it could walk into a show-ring today without causing much comment.

General Appearance

The Irish Wolfhound is the largest and tallest of the galloping hounds. It combines power and swiftness with keen sight, and in general type is a rough coated greyhound-like breed. Of great size and commanding appearance, very muscular though gracefully built, movement easy and active, head and neck carried high, tail carried low with a slight upward sweep towards the extremity.

Explanation

This gives a good general picture of the Irish Wolfhound as a big strong hound, capable of hunting large prey. I must confess I prefer the old standard where there was reference to the Great Dane and the Deerhound because I think it gave a more clear picture of the breed in the first instance.

Also, the type of coat and the method of hunting is more akin to the Deerhound who holds or pulls down its prey. Not as the greyhound, who is smooth coated and picks up its prey from the ground.

Most Irish Wolfhounds seen on their own look big and commanding, but when a number are seen together, such as at a show or here today, only a few have the commanding appearance and some even look quite small. The hounds who carry themselves with confidence, heads and necks held proudly and who move with a gracious ease, give the greatest sense of commanding appearance.

As to "Great Size" that does not mean bigger the better. The standard goes on to say Great size, including height at the shoulder and proportionate length, is the "desideratum to be aimed at" and it is desired to "firmly establish a breed that shall average 32-34 inches in dogs, showing the requisite power, activity, courage and symmetry". So what we want is a tall dog which is well proportioned. Strength, proportion or balance, are more important than straightforward height as such. Size or height without those two qualities is useless. Think how ineffective a tall beanstalk of a Wolfhound would be against a hungry 55-100lb wolf. However, a big top-rate Wolfhound should always beat a smaller wolfhound of the same quality when they meet in the show-ring. Overall balance, balance of height to size and weight is more desirable than a Wolfhound with one or two very good points but who lacks proportion.

Balance of proportion is something we all have to find out for ourselves by studying the Breed Standard, by looking at our own hounds and at consistent winners in the ring. Also read the judges' critiques. Many are worthless, but occasionally you find a judge who really hits the nail on the head when describing a dog. Other hound standards are valuable sources of information and well worth reading. Study them all with a critical but open mind and gradually, hopefully, your eye for an Irish Wolfhound will develop or improve.

Head and Skull

Long, the frontal bones very slightly raised and very little indentation between the eyes. Skull not too broad, muzzle long and moderately pointed.

Explanation

The faults concerning the head are again the balance aspect - too light or too heavy - in relation to the rest of the hound. Too highly arched frontal bones, which would give a Dane-like look to the head, as does deepness between the eyes, both ugly in a Wolfhound head. To assess the head you must feel down under the long hair of the beard and eyebrows to find a long, strong jaw and moderately pointed muzzle. Seen from the front, the head should get evenly wider from nose to occiput and viewed from the side the lower jaw should appear undercut - not the bite, just the jaw. I like to see a slightly aquiline look to the nose. Very young puppies have Roman noses. The eye should be equidistant between nose and occiput; any deviation should be in the muzzle, which may be slightly longer without spoiling the head.

Eyes - Dark

Explanation

Dark, with a soft expression and oval in shape, i.e. not too round and conversely not too slitted. A hard expression is undesirable and does not go with a gentle temperament. There is nothing worse than a round, light staring eye, it completely spoils the expression.

Ears - Small & Greyhound-like in carriage

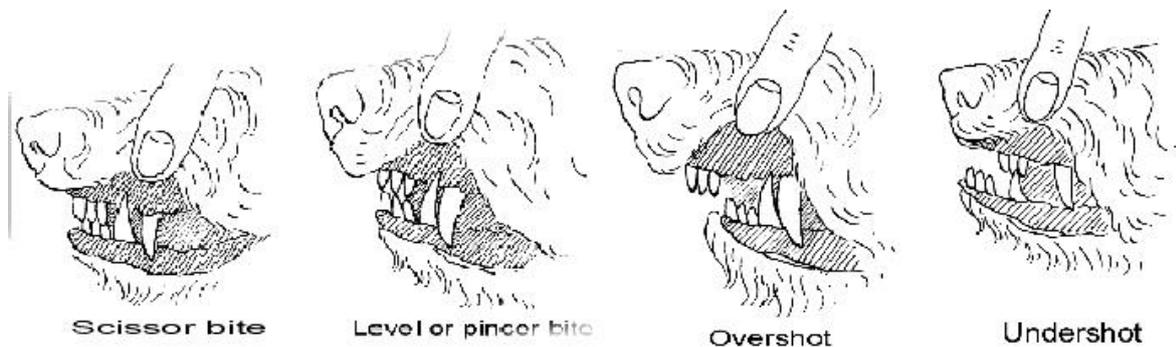
Explanation

Apart from the pleasing look of a small neat ear held close to the head, the more practical reason is for protection. A slashing, snappy prey would inevitably catch hold of a large flapping ear causing unnecessary pain and loss of blood. Perhaps it is as well the ancient Irish Wolfhounds did such a good job or we would all see many ragged-eared hounds trotting about today.

Bite - Scissor, although level is accepted

Explanation

Undershot or overshot bites will be penalised in the ring as this is a fault in the structure of the jaw, but I would not condemn an otherwise good dog for having slightly misplaced teeth. Occasionally the top two front teeth will close behind the bottom ones. This is not desirable but it is only a dentition fault and would not prevent a wolfhound grabbing its quarry and causing severe damage.



Neck

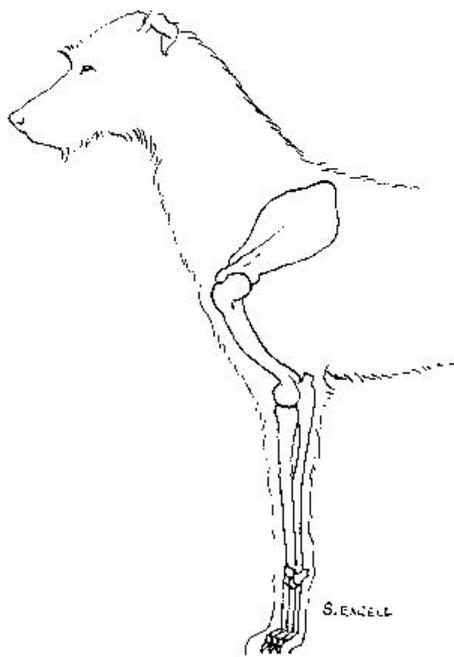
Rather long, very strong and muscular, well arched without dewlap or loose skin about the throat.

Explanation

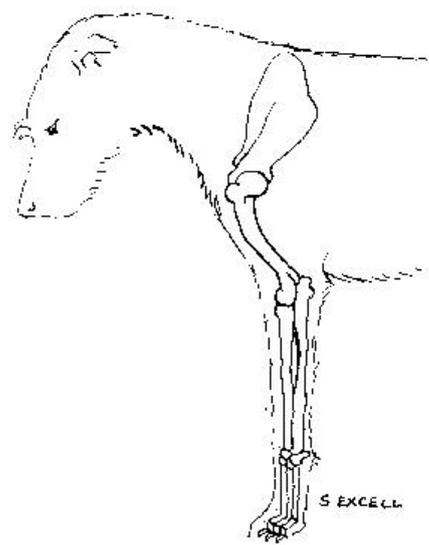
What a joy it is to see a well-arched neck with almost a crest on it, especially in a male as they should have more muscular necks than the female, though hers should be very strong also. Strength is more important than great length as Wolfhounds have to hold or throw their quarry and do not, as the greyhound, have to scoop it up from the ground. I must put in a word of caution here to those people who strip too much hair from the neck of their hounds. Yes, it does make it appear longer and prove there is no loose skin or dewlap, but it can easily be made to look weak and out of proportion to the rest of the hound. Short necks give a stiff, ungraceful look and can be the result of an upright shoulder. So a reasonably long neck combined with great strength is the correct type of neck, but not giraffes. Faults: Too short a neck or too full a dewlap.

Forequarters

Shoulders muscular giving great breadth of chest, set sloping. Elbows well under, turned neither inwards nor outwards.



Normal shoulder placement



Straight shoulder showing lack of angulation between upper arm and shoulder-blade.

Explanation

Shoulders - These are difficult to assess as they are very mobile, and apart from the joint at the point of the shoulder between the scapular and humerus, the shoulder is attached to the body only by muscles. For beginners to assess the set of the shoulder, the simplest way is to find the point of the shoulder which is fairly easy, trace your way up to the spine of the blade to the top, keep your hand there, run the other hand back to the point of the shoulder then on down the humerus to the elbow. That gives the angle of the shoulder. I

read somewhere that 90° is supposed to be the best angle and 130° the steepest and least desirable. I can't believe a Wolfhound shoulder could ever be 90°; 100° would be quite an achievement and 110° - 115° acceptable. A sloping shoulder is necessary as it acts as a shock absorber, enabling the hound to run for a long time before getting tired. Constant jarring from a straight set shoulder would become painful and cause the hound to tire more quickly. The blades should be long as well as sloping but should not meet at the top. A gap of two to three fingers width is about right. More than that and you either have a too short blade or a loaded shoulder, that is a shoulder with too much muscle under the blade pushing it out and away from the body, and in turn pushing the elbows out giving too wide a chest or front. Shoulders, as the Standard states, should be muscular, and the chest broad but not to the extent of coarseness and the loss of streamline.

Elbows

Well under and straight set. That does not mean the further under the better, as the chest must have room for breadth and depth to the point of the elbow. Elbows should be close to the chest, in and under the bulge of the shoulder muscle. Faults I have noticed are elbows placed too far under and turning slightly inwards, causing a tied-in-look and giving a stilted flapping style of movement. A narrow chest tends to go with this fault.

Leg

Forearm muscular and the whole leg strong and quite straight. This is quite clear and needs no explanation. I would excuse puppies and young juniors with slightly turned-out feet, though by 18 months to two years this should have strengthened and straightened. Youngsters with feet turning inwards should be viewed with great caution as feet have a tendency to turn in with age. Never think of buying a puppy with turned-in feet.

Body

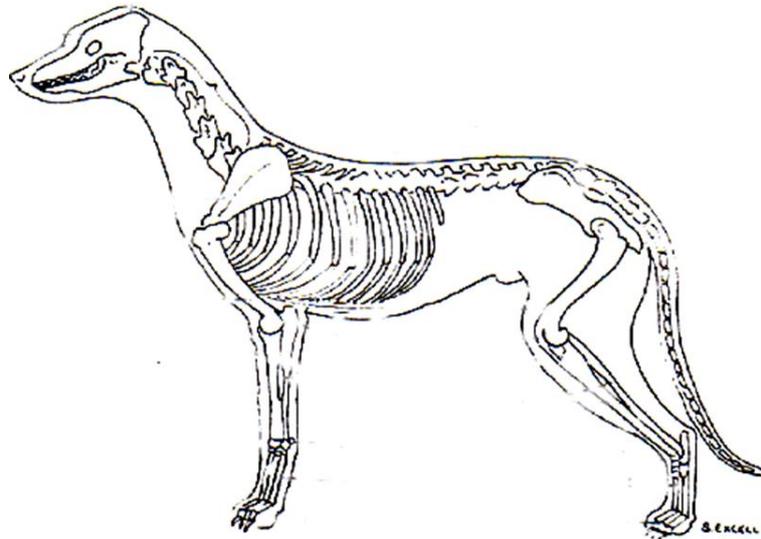
Chest very deep. Breast wide. Back rather long than short. Loins arched. Belly well drawn up.

Explanation

Body - Great depth and spring of rib is very important as it gives lung and heart room. A shallow chest that does not reach down to the elbow is very unsightly and completely spoils the underline of the body. The shallow rib cage often compensates with width and giving a barrel chest. Some experts say this gives greater capacity to lung and heart, but I have been told by heart specialists, a deep chest is the best and that is what our Standard shows to be correct. Betty Murphy, in her book on the breed, describes the chest, if bisected at right angles to the spinal column, as egg shaped. A very apt description. The breast should be wide, a generous hand's width between the elbows, and plenty between the point of the shoulders, coming well forward as opposed to sinking back to form a hollow chest.

Back

Long rather than short. Loins arched. Some people find the first part of this statement to be the vague part of the standard, but maybe it is where the eye and experience are most called upon in the interpretation of the Standard.



Take the back to be the whole ribcage and loin, and starting just behind the shoulder, the back dips slightly then gently rises up and over the loins dropping down to the hip and further on down the croup. The ribcage should be long, carrying almost as far back as the arch of the loin. The loin should not be excessively long, about a hand span in length. It must be broad and very strong as it plays a major part in the propulsion at the gallop. That gives the length to the back - a long ribcage coupled with a moderately long loin. Length of rib cage, together with depth and spring is important, as a lot of vital organs are inside - lungs, heart, liver and stomach, if they have to be squashed into too small a space the performance of the hound would suffer. Too long a loin without a well ribbed up body will lead to weakness and probable flattening of the loin arch and so inhibiting galloping ability. The spinal column in a galloping hound must be flexible, particularly in the region of the loin. Faults in the topline, too sunken or hollow back, obviously a bad weakness, which would make movement difficult particularly at the gallop, where the spine has to flex up into a curve. A straight back would create similar problems and probably also carry a high tail, as the spine would not drop well enough down over the croup. Another fault I have noticed is the falling away topline. All the height is at the shoulder and it gradually, sometimes quite steeply, drops away to the rear without proper undulations. Also, the roached back, which draws the hindquarters too far under the body and is accompanied by straight stifles.

Turning to the underline - We have already established that the ribs should be well sprung, deep and carried well back. Down at the brisket the ribs fit into the sternum or breastbone, which curves down from the front of the chest. By the time it reaches the elbow region it should straighten out and carry well back, almost to where the loin starts to arch up along the back. A short sternum means the ribs cut up too sharply, taking away from heart and lung room and generally spoils the underline and belly tuck-up. This is called herring gut.

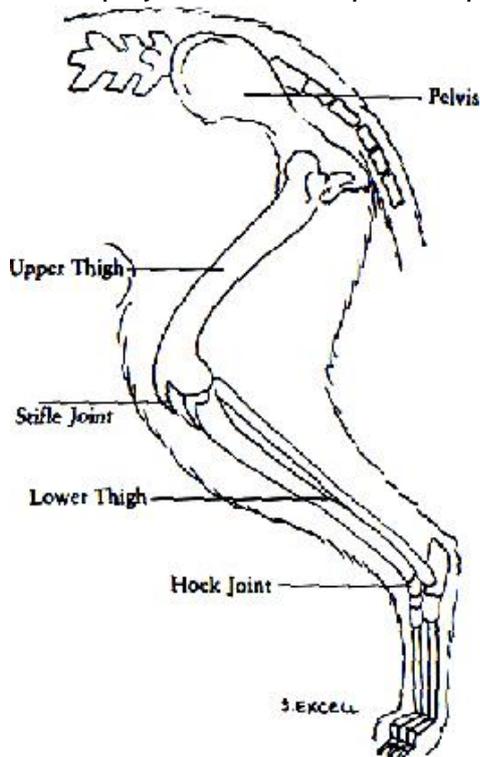
Belly should be well drawn up - Muscles and correct weight control this factor and obviously a healthy, correctly fleshed, strong dog is what we want. No tuck-up is a fault, but very little body between loin and ground is also unattractive and could be an indication of a hound carrying too little weight.

Hindquarters

Muscular thighs and second thighs, long and strong as in the greyhound, hocks well let down, turning neither in nor out.

Explanation

The majority of power for galloping comes from the hindquarters so strength and angulations are particularly important. The power comes up through the hock to the stifle, which plays the most important part, and into the pelvis and through the loin. Correct



angulation of the stifle is essential. Too much and the leg is too long, weaker and not easy to control. Too straight and the stride is shortened. The stifle is formed by the femur in the upper part of the leg and the tibia and fibula in the lower leg. The femur slopes from the rear to the front and the other two bones conversely. The hock should be well let down, that is shorter from ground to the point of the hock in relation to the length of the second thigh or the tibia and fibula. Straightness can occur in the hock if it is too long in relation to the second thigh. Plenty of width through the stifle is desirable. That enhances the leg shape and shows strength of muscle.

Looking further up to the croup there is another angle. The pelvis creates this as it is tilted backwards at an angle of about 30-35°, giving slope to the croup down to the tail, which should fit cleanly into the body without a lump. Seen from the rear, the width through the upper thigh should be greater than at

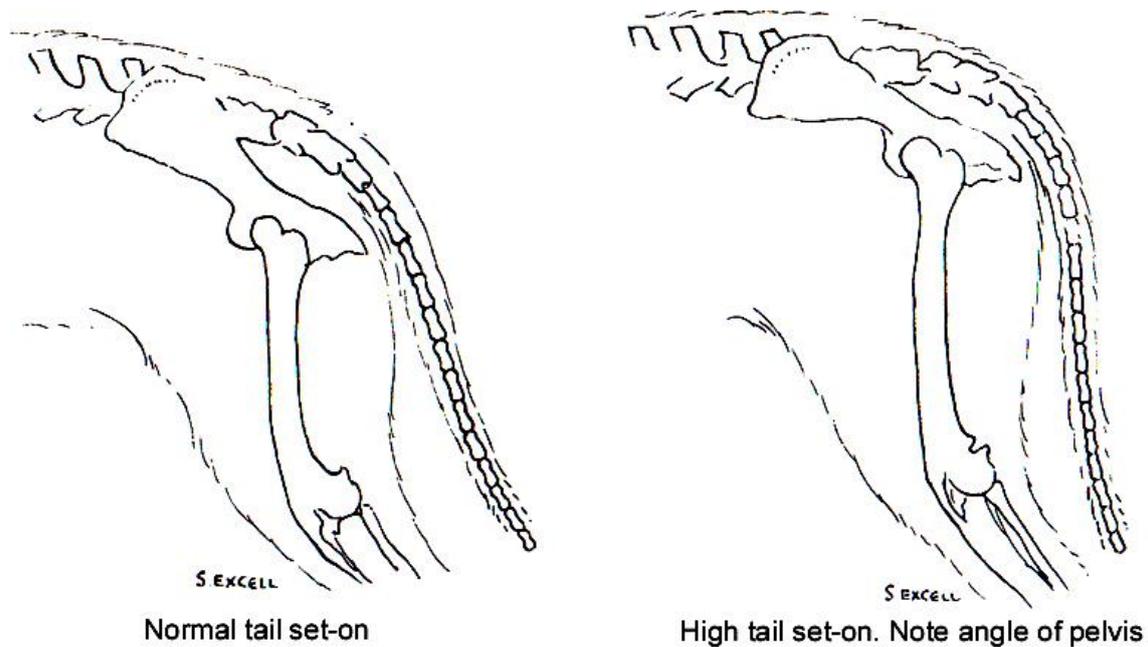
the point of the hip.

Tail

Long and slightly curved, of moderate thickness and well covered with hair.

Explanation

The tail acts as a balance and a rudder and to do so it must be a weighty object in itself, to balance such a heavy body. The length should be to at least halfway between the hock and the ground, if not a little more. The tail really comes into action at the gallop when the hound is weaving about, then it is hardly still at all. It also acts as a brake, frantically circling to help reduce speed especially downhill. Hair acts as a protection, so a good covering is necessary. The tail must be flexible to do its job, so a tightly curled one cannot work properly. A high tail carriage can be the sign of a cheerful disposition or other indication of mood, but a high tail-set is very wrong. Maybe too straight a pelvis has something to do with it, but certainly the spine stops curving down over the croup to create this problem.



Feet

Moderately large and round, neither turning inwards nor outwards. Toes well arched and close. Nails very strong and curved.

Explanation

If people have bad feet they are uncomfortable, often bad tempered and cannot get about with ease. The same applies to all animals. Wolfhound feet need to be fairly large and round to carry the weight of the dog. The toes must be well arched and close. If they are not, the foot is flat and open allowing all the grit and gravel to get into the soft part underneath, causing abrasions. Many years ago I had an Irish Wolfhound with the flat hare-type rear feet, the front were lovely. We took the dog walking in the mountains, but after one day on the fells his back feet were very sore; that ended the walking for days until the feet healed up. He would have been useless for real hunting, although he was big and strong. Apart from flat feet becoming sore over rough ground, the pads are not being used properly and the dog is likely to catch the feet on the ground as it moves - not good for movement. A good foot with the pads being used as intended, has an excellent non-slip surface and provides good traction with the ground so improving movement. Faults: Twisted feet, spreading toes.

Movement - Easy and active

Explanation

I wish it was as simple as that. At the trot, which is the most natural gait to assess the movement in the ring, the diagonally opposite legs move forward together. Occasionally a dog will pace, that is both legs on the same side move together with disastrous results. The rear legs are completely thrown out of rhythm and look disjointed. Once pacing has been corrected and the dog moves on the diagonals, the movement is usually normal and sound.

At the gallop the rear legs should over reach the forelegs on the outside. Obviously the legs cannot swing forward from the shoulders and pelvis, a centre of gravity must be maintained, so the feet are placed under the dog close to the centre of the dog's body but not so close as to make a single track. The rear legs should move directly behind the forelegs and should be scarcely visible when the hound is viewed from the front. The hock will bend slightly outward to accommodate the lift of the leg. Viewed from the side, the hind leg should track well up to the foreleg. The stride is long and free flowing using the whole leg. A rangy stride, quite unlike the stilted short pace of the terrier.

Faults in movement abound. At the rear, 'cow hocks' is probably the most prevalent. That means the hocks bend inwards and almost touch. Rear legs also flick stiffly out at the hock, perhaps because the stifle is weak and bends inwards preventing a smooth, straight, forward action. In front, the elbows can turn in creating a flapping wide action. When the elbows turn out, the feet and leg turn too far in. Weak movement is caused by faulty confirmation, so the Irish Wolfhound that is made correctly should move correctly. However, there is more to be seen in movement than leg action. In the show ring a judge will often move the hound to see how it handles and carries itself, as well as to assess the trueness of movement. A carefully handled hound can look magnificent at the stance, but on the move where it cannot be propped up, the head may drop and poke forward, the topline alter by flattening and the cleverly held up maternal belly sag down. Alternatively, the fidgety youngster may be more at ease on the move, showing off good conformation to advantage.

Coat

Rough and hard on body and legs, especially wiry and long over eyes, under jaw.

Explanation

The coat is double, a soft dense undercoat covered by a harsh topcoat, waterproof to keep out the wet, and thick enough to keep in the warmth. A soft silky coat collects burrs and grass seeds and it catches more easily on thorns and undergrowth. Faults: Soft, silky or woolly. The really incorrect coat is easy to see as it is very different from the typical coat. I have seen coats similar to the Afghan Hound coat, with a very long hair staple and quite a feather on the tail. Old English Sheepdog-type coats crop up occasionally. That is quite a wiry coat but too full in under the topcoat. Then there is the Great Dane-type coat with too little undercoat and a short staple topcoat.

Colour

Grey, Brindle, Red, Black, Pure white, or any colour which appears in the Deerhound. Too much white is undesirable and should not go beyond a patch on the chest, a tip to the tail and a little on the end of the toes. Excessive white on feet and worse, on the legs is very unsightly. Pigmentation of nose and lips is black, no matter what the coat colour may be.

This is our Breed Standard. It describes one type of hound only -
that is the correct and only type of Irish Wolfhound.

As no dog is perfect you can only hope to find one as close to the standard as possible.