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A dog needs a job to feel fulfilled. But, what openings are there in the modern world for a dog that once yanked knights off horses?

Today we watch our Irish wolfhounds sunk deep in the couch asleep, so stuporous that their tongues spill to the floor, you have to wonder, this is the dog that fired the Celtic imagination?

Well, okay, your first thought may be, is he still breathing? Do dogs hibernate? Is this natural?

But Irish wolfhounds were war dogs once and hunters. They brought down stags. They rid Ireland of all its wolves. Their bravery and spirit were legendary. They are woven all through the mythic tales of ancient Ireland. Their image is seen on medieval tapestries and etched in golden ornaments. But the sound of swords on shields has faded. The horn of the hunt no longer sounds. What's a giant war hound to do when he puts himself out business?

They nearly faded into history. By the mid-1800's wolfhounds were just a rumor in the British Isles. They were nearly extinct. A Scot, Capt. George Augustus Graham, stepped in and meticulously brought the breed back from the brink.

Today, they're known as jolly goofballs, loving, will-work-for-cheese hounds. Some wolfhound owners scoff at the idea that there's any fire left in them. But we forget they were renowned for two traits: they were fierce giants, but they also famous companions, so intelligent and human in their ways that heroes of Irish legend considered them full equals.

So what's a wolfhound's job today? Because as war dogs and legends go, some are pretty sure wolfhounds have gone to seed.

Most of us cherish the rapport we have with our hounds. Like me, many wolfhound owners have lived with several other breeds before we fell in love with our gentle giants and we never want to be without one again. It's their job to be our boon companions and they do it exceptionally well.

So, many also excel as therapy dogs. They greet frazzled travelers at airports and wrap them in a needed moment of calm. The sight of a wolfhound evokes wonder in nursing homes and hospitals. Wolfhounds read people well and possess tremendous empathy. The breed is sometimes called “aloof” by those who don’t know wolfhounds, but show them a person in pain or one who’s lost and lonely and, preternaturally, the wolfhound is there. It’s not a job pouring out compassion. It’s a calling.

Believe it or not, some wolfhounds do well in competitive obedience or agility. I know, most of us have seen the cool amusement in our hound’s eye when we say, “sit!” or “fetch!” or “spit out the cat!” As hunters, they needed will, intelligence and the gift of independent thinking when released by their humans to chase down deer or wolves. Today, those same traits make them question what’s in it for them when we silly humans spout commands that they full well understand. They just don’t see any urgency in them budging from the couch. But, motivate them (we’re talking high-value treats here) and tap into their naturally strong single-mindedness and you have a winner on your hands. It merely takes love and the patience of a saint.

Born to run, they also do well at lure coursing, and some love the show ring because, in a wolfhound’s view, it’s only right that people should admire and applaud for them. Genuflection is probably out of the question. They know we’re not as limber as they are.

But I think the wolfhound has another job today. My girl,

Oona, has taught me this. She can be a couch potato with the best of 'em, true. At least when her teenage nephew, Oisin, isn't dive bombing her for attention. But what lies behind her eyes is something from another, wilder time. Other wolfhound owners have seen it in the wild stares of their hounds, too, something old and wise. The wolfhound mystique is still there if you're looking. I think it's the wolfhound's job to remind us that we occupy but a tiny blip on the line of time. "Modern" is just an illusion. What we believe today, we may not tomorrow. But, the thrill of the hunt, the flush of glory, the call of the wild...are eternal. And the Irish wolfhound remains a creature stepped from legend, even if where they landed is on our couches. They're here to help us shake the scales from our jaded eyes. Wolfhounds inspire us to higher, timeless ideas.

If you want to pay them in cheese or pizza, well, they're alright with that, too.