



Aug 10, 2017

An Irish wolfhound puppy is deceptively fragile. I know, you've just seen yours eat your back yard. He's munched up your divan and he's eyeing at the baseboard in a way that makes you a litttttle nervous.

Fragile? At six months, he's already over a hundred pounds. He's bigger (and a lot rowdier) than most kids. He's certainly faster. You've seen him get the zoomies so bad he blurred running up the wall and over your other wide-eyed dogs.

But have you seen his X-rays? Do sometime. It's alarming because most of his major bones are floating in a mass of tendons and cartilage. They won't completely meet until he's 13 months or older. He may for all practical purposes be a Tasmanian devil, but he's got to be held to strict rules or he can hurt himself, sometimes in ways that require expensive surgery to avoid life-long impairment.

He shouldn't play with the older dogs. He can't go up and down stairs. He can't jump out of your SUV.

Which explains why I was out in the dead of winter with pockets full of cheese and a whole rotisserie chicken trying to tempt a balky puppy to go up and down a portable car ramp. I resorted to the ramp because I was starting to walk funny. I walked funny because at eight months old, Oisin was too heavy for me to lift, no matter how many Russian weight-lifter tricks I tried.

And Oisin *needed* to go for rides. For an Irish wolfhound, our boy was unusually shy. He slid behind my leg when people came up to pet him. Loud sounds made him jump. He tucked tail submissively when strange dogs came to investigate the gargantuan puppy.

Delicately, since he was 13 weeks old, I'd taken him out every day to safely experience something new. He'd made major gains. But my loving little boy still watched the world sideways. Socialization was critical but he couldn't do it from the back yard.

I blundered that fall when he only weighed 90 pounds. He'd watched his aunt Oona bound up and down the ramp and, with encouragement, he tried it a couple of times, too. There. Check ramps off the list. So I thought. Mostly he stood patiently at the tailgate of our SUV until Dad hefted him up. I guess I was cherishing the time I could still pick Oisín up. He was all legs and fuzzy snout, a precious package. It just felt good to hold him.

Until my knees started to pop and I saw stars, subtle signs that my heart might be in the right place, but my body was about to bend in ways that would make nature and contortionists wince.

Oona has been a breeze to ramp train, but then she's fearless. Oisín decided the ramp was a sketchy character he'd just rather not mess with, and when a wolfhound makes up his mind you may as well have a seat 'cuz he ain't budging.

Unless you can make it worth his while. Cheese is the great persuader. We started with the ramp flat on the ground in the back yard. He stepped on it, he got cheese. Soon he was rambling all over the thing. So, I slightly elevated it on a stump. In a day, he was beating me to it to prance up and down the thing for cheese.

I moved it to the back of the car. He looked at it like it was infested with rattlesnakes. Would I just pick him up instead?

Because he *really* wanted to go for ride. It was back to the stump for another week of conditioning.

It took a month, but back at the rear end of the car, using pinches of cheese, vienna sausage, bits of deli ham and the patience of a Jedi and... I had him halfway up. He was seven feet long. He could stretch into the car to get whatever treat I had. But he would not plant those back feet on the ramp and go on in.

I brought out the heavy guns — rotisserie chicken. My mouth still waters just typing the words. I can smell it. I can feel the grease on my lips. So could he because he scampered right up that ramp and into the back when I set the tray down. I had to pry him off of it so we could do it again. And he did. Up and down the ramp. As long as the chicken held out. We went through five of them in a week, carefully peeled from the bone, lovingly laid in the plastic tray. The ramp was now Oisín's happy place.

Winter had turned to spring during our training and we were on the road again on weekends. He marched in a St. Patrick's Day parade with Oona, he walked Music Row in Nashville and he got to see his sister again in Bowling Green, Kentucky, all because he could confidently load into the car again without crippling his dad.

Then he balked again. Even rotisserie chicken failed to turn the trick. I was baffled. I folded up the ramp, strapped it back in the back and...Oisín stepped into the back end with a little bunny hop.

He'd decided he'd rather just do it his way.

Any port in a storm....