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An odd question, sure, but my house runs on string cheese. It's how my wolfhounds train me.

I “buy” a place on the couch with it. Otherwise my hounds open one bleary eye, snort, and go comatose again. They need *all* the couch for a proper rest, yanno.

Need to get Oisín into his kennel? He'll work for cheese. I use it to persuade Oona to get out of the car after a walk. Otherwise she'll loll across the back seat like the Queen of Sheba until the cows come home.

Indulgent? Maybe. But my hounds are my friends, my children. I never use force. These giants — 300 pounds of dog between the two of them — do what I want when I want, all for bit of

cheese. I've never felt the need to be lord of the high manor. Being loved by wolfhounds, to me, is a far, far better thing.

Still, there are times when I wonder how [Fionn mac Cumhaill](#) trained *his* hounds. He had 500. They fought with him when he and his band of heroes went into battle for the High King. I've flipped through the [Fenian Cycle](#). There's not a mention of string cheese anywhere in there. Mine would boldly follow me into a cheese shop. How did the ancient Celts *train* their wolfhounds?

The short answer is: We have no idea. They weren't keen on writing instruction manuals. Or any writing at all. What we know of the ancient Celtic culture was scribed by medieval Irish monks. They collected oral tales like the Fenian Cycle in their illuminated manuscripts. These are high tales of bravery, battle and magic. Wolfhound feats and prowess are covered, but there's not a single incident of a hero commanding his hound, "Sit! Stay!"

We do know how *other* ancient cultures trained dogs. They kept written records. The Romans, not known for their genteel ways, believed that dogs, horses and children had a wild streak which had to be broken before they could become civilized and cooperative. Rome produced the giant [Molossus](#) war dog. It's now extinct it was so beloved.

Throughout the ancient world, dogs were guardians, hunters and companions. It's likely that whatever training they received, they got at the back of a hand. Breaking their spirit was how it was done for centuries through the 1890s, when T.S. Hammond wrote in "Practical Dog Training" that "all knowledge that is not

beaten into a dog is worthless for all practical purposes.”

By the 1930s, dog owners were told that their dogs needed regimented training to fit into our world, and training became more and more “scientific.” Obedience became a popular sport like agility and tracking.

Real science kicked in in the 1980s when we learned that teaching dogs through compulsion might get results, but it doesn’t make friends. It can lead to fear, resentment and dog bites.

Besides admiring their ferocity and bravery, the Celts loved their hounds and considered them equal to humans in wit and discernment. Wolfhounds were valued warriors, but close comrades, too. You might make a dog obey you through force, but you can’t make it open up its heart. And the Celts clearly knew the heart of the ancient wolfhound.

“Gentle when stroked, fierce when provoked.” It was a slogan of the high kings of Ireland. For those of you who know wolfhounds, I’d say trying to force one to do anything would qualify as “provoke.” You don’t try it very often. The expression, “lamb becomes lion” also comes to mind.

Obedience training probably wasn’t a thing in the ancient world. There were no official dog breeds before the 1800s. There were *types* of dogs. Guard dogs, rat dogs, fighting dogs, hunting hounds... lines of dogs bred for generations for their specific tasks. Irish wolfhounds, or wolf dogs, were hard-wired to hunt by sight. They might need to be exposed to game, watch older dogs do it and hone their skills through actual practice, but there was little human intervention needed. The necessary drive was

in their genes.

So wolfhounds hunted or guarded their humans when needed, then came inside with the family like other family members. They slept by the fire, were given their share of food and went wherever the family went. They *were* family. They were shown the basic rules like children were, expected to fit in, but there was no need for choke chains or training manuals.

In other words, they probably lived a lot like wolfhounds do with their people today. Except today's wolfhounds aren't expected to battle crazy Celts much anymore. And they sure won't turn up their noses at little string cheese. Or pizza crust. Dog biscuits or chicken bits...