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Once, they were the terror of the battlefield, a blur of deadly teeth and great slabs of muscle. Today, the war dogs of the Celts might wreak havoc in your refrigerator.

Once they snipped off the heads of their enemies. Today, Irish wolfhounds can fit an entire pork roast in their mouth. And smile innocently.

If you live with a wolfhound today, you have to wonder if these were the same dogs who thrilled the Irish Gaels and found a place in the Icelandic sagas of the Vikings.

Like most sighthounds, they sleep a lot of the day. Deeply. So deeply you may walk over a poke yours to be sure they're still

breathing. You may notice as they sprawl across the couch that they have heroically *long* tongues. Look, it's stretched to the *floor*.

Their ability to lap up water for endless minutes is certainly legendary. But...how could these dogs ever have been terrible war dogs of Golden Age of Ireland? They say [Finn McCool](#), the mythic leader of the Fianna, never died. He sleeps in a mountain, surrounded by his men and hundred of wolfhounds, waiting to come to Ireland again in a time of great need. Is that where all the *real* wolfhounds are now? Sleeping under a hill? That makes a *lot* of sense...

But, walk with me to my backyard, or any place where two wolfhounds are playing. The stuff of legends, it's still there. Your wolfhound may not find the chance to yank a knight off his horse a lot these days. But he still has it.

Like most dogs, one wolfhound will signal the other with a quick play bow that the mayhem about to come is all in good fun. And then they explode. How can a 160-pound dog *fly* like that? Five minutes ago you were about to turn them on the couch to avoid bed sores. Now you're edging against the wall or hanging onto a tree to stay out of their way. Are they in any kind of control? Oh yes. The terrible kind.

With mine, it's usually the juvenile, [Oisin](#), egging on his aunt [Oona](#). He charges. He nips at her bottom. He snatches her tail and crunches down. Watch his eyes. When they go huge and round, you know *he* knows that he's just unleashed hell. She whips around her muscular neck, lunges and Oisin falls over himself to get away. They run. Like stallions. You literally feel

the ground shake. Dirt flies. A wolfhound can hit 40 miles per hour and they're doing that, weaving through trees and bushes like shaggy rockets trailing leaves in their wake.

And then Oisin whips around to face her. They leap completely off the ground, 300 pounds of crazy showing more teeth than you ever knew they had. Clash of the Titans. It's just for show, sure. It shows you it may be time to break out the fire hose to separate them. Then they romp a little farther, poking each other with their snouts, grinning like linebackers in the end zone.

Sometimes it's Oona who feels full of herself and harrows Oisin. Oisin's just a spirited boy. Oona is an elemental force and even though it's just play, Oisin keeps glancing back over his shoulder, a little unsettled. She is a terrible sight, focused on her prey like a lazer. Luckily, he's a touch lighter and springier and dances an inch beyond her teeth until she settles down and slows her charge. Then he slips around and bites her butt and there they go, two grey blurs tearing up the yard again.

You begin to understand the fate of the wolves of Ireland when you watch two wolfhounds work in tandem. Oona adores Bentley, our scappy rescue and the real mastermind of the pack. At play time, she baits him, trying to get him to run. He's usually too wise. He knows the drill. But sometimes he shrugs, says what the hell, and zips away, causing Oona and Oisin to blast away after him. He can easily outturn them. But they team up, coursing along either side of Bentley, eliminating his options, chasing him to a standstill. Then Oona sits on him.

I watch this play closely because, despite Oona and Oisin being raised since pups with Bentley and each having a relationship

with him, Irish wolfhounds are still sighthounds. That lightning prey drive is deep in their DNA. They are hard-wired to bring down small game. Too many wolfhound owners have been horrified when their usually affable hound suddenly cut loose and harrows a cat or small dog. Bentley is smart and constantly reminds them who he is, Bentley the Brain. But I watch...

I watch because of the experience a friend had a few years ago with her pack of wolfhounds. She lived on a remote mountainside here in Tennessee and one day let the pack out to do their business. This time they disappeared. There were no roads for miles so she was only mildly concerned. Sometimes they roamed. This day, around sundown, she looked up from washing dishes at the kitchen sink and saw her pack returning down the hillside. The big male was prancing proudly — holding an entire deer easily in his maw. She's since discouraged this. It wasn't deer season and in Tennessee there *is* no wolfhound season for deer.

Wolfhounds still have the stuff of mighty hunters and warriors...