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The Irish wolfhound has an elusive, indefinable quality — a mystique — that passionately binds people to the breed. Though its long history, Romans, Irish monks, viking princes and English scribes have written lyrically about the wolfhound after looking into one's eyes and falling in love with what looked back.

Sometimes we see that old-soul intelligence in a dog that doesn't *quite* look like a pureblooded Irish wolfhound. In fact, it's not. It's lurcher or a long dog. I met one recently that appeared to be mostly Great Pyrenees — except he was huge, even for that breed. And there was something about him that was familiar, his head shape, his bearing. I knew he was a wolfhound mix when he calmly approached me, looked me in the eyes and I felt like my soul was being sifted and weighed. He had an incredibly sweet, powerful presence and I was drawn to him.

My first giant hound, as I've told you [here before](#), was a long dog, half

wolfhound and half Scottish deerhound. Cuchulain was black and sleek, the original long-legged beastie. He was wildly smart and had a wicked sense of humor. I'd never met a dog like him. It didn't even feel right to call him a "dog" at all.

Cuchulain was an accident. An old college friend of mine had a deerhound sire and a wolfhound dame and underestimated how scary smart and capable these dogs are. They got together and my friend suddenly had a litter of 14 giant puppies. Cuchulain was my gateway hound into the world of Irish wolfhounds.

Many today who have lurchers or long dogs have similar stories. They were accidents or bred intentionally for hunting and wound up at shelters because the breeders became uncooperative after the sale and the original owners had no idea what they were getting into.

Long dogs are the results of breeding two sighthounds — deerhounds, borzoi, saluki, greyhounds or wolfhounds. Lurchers have a sighthound parent and a non-sighthound parent, usually a working or hunting dog. Like the wolfhound, they have a long history.

In the Middle Ages when kings reserved huge tracts of land as royal hunting estates, they created a society of poachers who risked hanging or torture to feed their families on royal deer or game.

The Irish wolf dog was the elite hunting dog of Europe, fast enough to chase down a wolf or stag and strong enough to kill it. And, by royal decree, they could only be owned by royalty.

Poachers got around this by crossbreeding the wolf dog with other types of dogs, usually another hunting hound. If found in the possession of one, they'd dodged the wolfhound ban and otherwise had a swift, powerful hunting companion.

Most frequently, they chose a non-sighthound hunting hound to breed with. Why? Better recall and hopefully better obedience. Sighthounds are shaggy missiles when their prey drive kicks in. They run flat out to

their prey and shut out all else. But a poacher might have to leave in a hurry if the game wardens came around and he needed a dog that would quickly return and follow his instructions to make a quick, stealthy getaway.

Long dogs were used when a hunter needed something closer to the weight and strength of a wolfhound, but the greater speed of a lighter sighthound.

Long dogs and lurchers make exceptional companions and are for many their first introduction to the world of the sighthound. But every now and then, some with purebreds make lurcher or long dog owners feel inferior because they have a “mutt.” This is wrongheaded. Not only do the mixes have a long, romantic history, they have the same spark that companions of purebreds cherish. They often have that otherworldly quality of our wolfhounds. Because they got a dose of the same genes we love so much.

I know in the case of Cuchulain, he also got what many first generation crosses experience, the hybrid vigor. He was huge, remarkably healthy, bursting with intelligence and personality and was, in short, a live wire, a startling presence. He lived for 12 years without any sort of illness. He was a hound for the ages.

I want to further explore lurcher crosses and genetics in upcoming posts. It's a fascinating subject with some surprising turns...