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PART NINE IN A SERIES

I watched a friend's video last night of her beautiful wolfhound girl giving birth. The sudden hot flush of tears surprised me, but I'm not at all ashamed to admit it. Because the birth of an Irish wolfhound is an occasion, a joyful thing. Three months from now, that puppy is going to claim a human family. Lives will be changed by love.

I'm not a teary type. In fact, I'm a dedicated curmudgeon, yet I cried with other friends this week learning that their beloved hounds had left them, taken by osteosarcoma and other sudden ailments. And again watching a Facebook friend put together an incredible chain of volunteers to relay a rehomed wolfhound a thousand miles across Australia to a family that had just lost two wolfhounds to bone cancer. *Two*.

Writing this is hard, not because I'm emotional but because Oona keeps smacking my hand and flipping the computer out of my lap. She insists we cuddle. And I'm holding onto her hard. Shockingly, she lost a brother to osteosarcoma two weeks ago.

And that's life with the Irish wolfhounds: love and loss, joy and tears. I've never lived with a dog remotely like a wolfhound. I hear this over and over from others who never saw the changes coming, who never expected to love a dog as much as this.

So, can you imagine a day when there *were* no more wolfhounds?

It could be coming one day. The Wild Stare in a series of recent articles has looked at the wolfhound's shrinking gene pool and what that's meant to other breeds and species.

[Last time](#), we talked about the work of Swiss geneticist Dr. Silvan Urfer, who says that thanks to overuse of a few popular sires, the gene pool is dangerously thin now. He's asking breeders to set aside hounds who are not part of the current and growing genetic "bottleneck" to create a breeding reserve and save what little genetic diversity the wolfhound still has left.

He's been largely ignored by breeders who don't understand the implications of his research or don't believe his findings.

What can wolfhound owners like you and I do?

Stick With Reputable Breeders

Now more than ever it's important to get your puppy from a reliable breeder. They conduct important health screenings on their dams and sires before arranging to have litters and test puppies early on, too.

As we learned in this series, screenings can't catch everything. Some conditions occur because of recessive genes, the effects of which can skip multiple generations before activating. It's a crap shoot. But the best breeders do everything they can to tip the odds in your favor of having a healthy puppy who will enjoy a full life.

Also, ask potential breeders if they're aware of Urfer's research. In planning litters, reputable breeders do their best to bring the best genes into their lines. But as Urfer explains on his website about genetic bottlenecks, heavily used sires who now dominate

the wolfhound gene pool may not show up in the standard pedigree. They may go as far as 10 generations back. So, a breeder could easily be unaware that he or she is breeding bottleneck puppies.

Reputable breeders are on your side. They love your puppy, too, and want the very best life for him or her.

What If You Have A Bottleneck Hound?

If you've learned from Urfer's [website](#) and the [Irish Wolfhound Database](#) that your wolfhound is a bottleneck hound — that it shares the DNA from a severely restricted gene pool with thousands of wolfhounds around the globe— relax. There's no more danger now that your hound will develop a life-threatening condition than there was before. The die was already cast in their genes at the moment of conception.

Keep giving your dog the best nutrition and supplements you can as recommended by your breeder. Keep them physically fit. These are positive steps you can take to give your dog the best chance at a full life.

Urfer's research and recommendations are aimed at *future* puppies breeders will produce. He's urging breeders to set aside non-bottleneck hounds as a breeding reserve and to never breed them with bottleneck hounds. His goal is a pool of genes that can be used to save genetic diversity in the Irish wolfhound.

We all know that wolfhounds are already called “the Heartbreak Hound” because they're prone to cancers and heart problems. If you used a reputable breeder, you've done everything possible to shield your hound from calamity.

No one can guarantee that a bottleneck hound or a non-neck hound will ever be completely disease free. There are simply too many variables.

I've discovered through my research for this series that both my Oona and Oisin are bottleneck hounds. Six or seven generations back, they acquired the gene set belonging to a tiny handful of popular sires. Neither of my dogs will ever be a parent and pass on that restricted bloodline.

Meanwhile, I'm going to do what every wolfhound companion does — love my hounds, hold onto them tight, savor every moment I'm given with them and stay devoted to keeping them healthy and safe.