



Feb. 1, 2018

People who aren't familiar with the Irish wolfhound are usually bowled over by their size. The tallest breed on the planet, they're impressive, to be sure. Spend a little time with one and you're likely to notice they're surprisingly gentle for such a giant medieval hunting hound.

They can also run like a stallion and their raw strength is predictably impressive. Moreover, a wolfhound is sharply intelligent, strong-willed and intensely loyal.

But people who live with an Irish wolfhounds will tell you this is how they steal your heart: They have loving personalities bigger than they are.

It starts early. *Very* early.

I have a friend who's raising a litter of wolfhounds. When they were just three weeks old, their eyes still closed and barely able to move around, one of the brothers woke up and couldn't feel his litter mates nearby. I've never heard one so young howl before, but he did, a heartbreakingly tiny, bold voice, calling out plaintively for his pack.

One by one, his sisters and brothers rolled, slowly tottered and dragged their round little bodies across the blanket. In slow motion, they surrounded their brother. Then they all slept in a heap, and he did, too, knowing he was loved and not alone.

Empathy is a conscious decision for a wolfhound. I saw this when I brought Oisin home at 13 weeks and he met his aunt Oona for the first time. She was two, a wild child still, very much a diva and intensely bonded to me. It was her home and I was her human. And I showed up one day with a baby wolfhound. She saw the writing on the wall at a glance. She was *not* happy. She demanded to meet the interloper immediately.

I was seriously afraid she'd eat the little guy. Oona loomed over baby Oisin like a thunderhead. She dropped her head and sniffed him. He tentatively sniffed back, just a fraction her size. Then

they entwined necks and inhaled each other. And she had the damndest look in her eye when she raised up again. She'd smelled family, blood of her blood. She gave a deep sigh of resignation. And my free-spirited girl was gone. She'd become Auntie Oona, devoted mentor.

Since then, Oisín has swung by her tail, nipped her bottom and generally deviled Oona with impunity. A naturally shy boy, he needed a strong guardian. She watched over him fiercely. He blossomed in her shadow.

In 1924, Mrs. G.C. Shanks was asked to tell readers of the Irish Wolfhound Club Yearbook what to expect from a wolfhound as a pet. She wrote, "Their gentleness is not a cloak to an insipid character but the natural complement of a brave and fearless nature."

"He is a born sentimentalist and seems to have a strong family instinct which inclines him to adopt and cherish all the small dogs of the neighbourhood. He will invite them in to play with him, when he has had enough he will escort them to the gate, wish them a very good day and stroll off in dignified solitude."

My Finn never met creature he didn't like. Donkeys, cattle, parakeets and ferrets all intrigued him — and not at all in a predatory way. He was gracious and charmed them all with a gentle touch nose to nose. Compassion was woven all through our big wheaten boy. He was all heart.

We had a weekly play date with a group of dogs that including a huge, loveable Leonberger named Magnum. He and Finn gently roughhoused, finally able to play with someone their own size. Magnum broke the heart of every one of us when he died one

day in his sleep, terribly young.

His owner had other dogs so the playdates continued. The first one after Magnum left us, his owner was seated apart from the rest of us and Finn with great gravity walked to her and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. Finn lingered with her and the two of them discussed Magnum. She told him Magnum had gone to the Bridge and that it was going to be okay. She said he understood and agreed.

The Irish wolfhound has a presence. They're discerning, intuitive, quirky and whimsical. Some say they're magic, the stuff of fairy tales.

Mrs. Shanks in 1927 wrote, "He is an adept at amusing himself and must, I think, have a very keen imagination which peoples his world with delightful things and so saves him from boredom."

These dogs definitely have an inner life, humor and graciousness. They'll surprise you again and again. The one constant in life with an Irish wolfhound is their unflinching, unstoppable love for you. It's startling. It's inspiring and it's life-changing. And this is how they steal your heart....