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“That’s the biggest dog I’ve ever seen!”

When you take an Irish wolfhound out for a walk, you’ll hear it again and again. A wolfhound’s the size of a pony. People’s jaws drop. They want to know how much your hound eats, why he’s not wearing a saddle and many are impressed by how calm, well-behaved and sweet-natured these hounds are.

But few see the amazing inner athlete.

Then someone asks, “What were they used for?” Most recently, chasing down and [killing wolves](#), I say. And then a flicker of a light comes on.

Wolves are of course big and ferocious. They can run at a top speed of about 40 mph. Their jaws can exert 398 pounds of pressure per square inch, enough to crush the femur of an adult moose.

Now you have their attention, but it's only when you see an Irish wolfhound run that the legend comes to life. They run with heart and joy, flat out, and the ground shakes and dirt flies. You edge back against a wall or a tree instinctively because when they turn and come galloping back, the last place you want to be is in the path of a 160-pound wolfhound thundering your way.

I once lived with deerhounds, which weren't quite as large as my wolfhounds and were quicker. They have an interesting quirk, the body slam. They raced straight at you and then launched and slammed your chest with theirs. Playfully. Cuchulain, our male, was kind enough to glance off, but Gracie gave it all she had. It was brace or be flattened.

Irish wolfhounds are sighthounds — along with deerhounds, greyhounds, borzoi, salukis and whippets — dogs who are among the most structurally functional of all canines. They have larger chests for bigger lungs and hearts that give them sustained bursts of energy for high speeds. Their bodies are long, lean and elastic. They're bred with crisp eyesight to spot distant prey and the horsepower and agility to chase it down through forest brambles, rocky slopes or open plains.

But the biggest of the group, the Irish wolfhound, is alone able to wear down a wolf running 40 mph, grab one by the back and shake it to death.

The last third of a sighthound's back is curved. Along with

powerful haunches and shoulders, the spine flexes like a coiled spring when they sprint. In a full run, sighthounds flash between two extreme postures, the tuck, where their muscular backs are completely bowed, their back haunches are drawn up and their front legs slash down and back, to fully extended like a shaggy flying rocket. It's called the double suspension gallop, the swiftest of canine gaits, and only sighthounds use it.

Each pair of feet, back and front, touch down together, giving them stability and force. The tuck gathers the full energy of their bodies, the extension propels it forward in a smooth, mighty flash.

It's an impressive sight when a greyhounds races, but to see a dog with the mass of a wolfhound flexing from the tuck to the extension and back in a blur is an awesome sight.

For comparison, most horses gallop at about 30 mph. The Guinness Book of Records puts the fastest speed for a racehorse at 43.97 mph. For centuries, wolfhounds coursed alongside horses on the way to the hunt or to battle.

Luckily for most wolfhound owners, they don't lurch around like a sack of rockets all day long. They sleep up to 14 hours a day, as do most sighthounds. In fact, they bond pretty well with the couch. You may be tempted to poke them to be sure they're still breathing. With great power comes great snoozes.

Lure coursing is popular with some wolfhound owners and is a great way to keep your slumber-prone athlete in top condition. You can find out more about how to get started [here](#).

Given ample space to run, most wolfhounds will spring into

action a few times a day, especially if they live with another wolfhound or a high spirited partner. They get the “zoomies” starting at just a few months old and love to run so much, in fact, that it’s a hazard for immature hounds whose growth plates haven’t closed yet. You can read more about that [here](#).

The sight of a wolfhound running has inspired us from the beginning. That’s clear from what they dug up while building the [M3 motorway](#) in Ireland in 2007. The controversial roadway slashed across the eastern slopes of Tara, the holiest site of Bronze Age Ireland, the hill of the high kings. Teams of archaeologists worked feverishly ahead of the machines.

At the village of Lismullin, they hit the motherlode, a giant ceremonial complex similar to Stonehenge, an important early burial place. They also found a single grave containing the remains of a giant hound. From its size and huge chest, witnesses said they had no doubt it was a legendary Irish wolf dog, laid to rest with great care in the shadow of Tara.

Who this hound was we’ll likely never know. The bones were sacked up and hauled off to a government warehouse. But the people who buried it and whose hearts it obviously held placed the dog on its side as if it were running, running into the afterlife.

The sight of a wolfhound running stirs something in us, and most of us who have lived with and lost them believe we’ll see them again, and when we do, they’ll be running to greet us.