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By PHILIP SANTILHANO

“It’s not a dog, it’s a horse!”

We have all had that comment thrown at us by someone who presumably thought it was funny and original. The fact that it was probably not that amusing the first time around, and it has been repeated ad-nauseam every time we have taken our dogs out in public ever since never seems to occur to the people who say it. That it is patently obviously ridiculous does not help either.

Have these people never actually seen a horse?

For the most part, we smile resignedly, and move on, or resort to telling the fast assembling audience a few perfunctory facts about our “horse” dog.

But instead of being mildly irritated by or slightly dismissive of the person who claimed equine status for our hound, perhaps we should consider why what was said was said?

Obviously, statements like “That’s a big dog!” are simply not going to do the job. Great Danes are “big dogs”. My mother has one that is perceptibly taller at the shoulder than either Reilly or Dougal, and heaven too boot, but when we take one of our wolfhounds round to visit, and there are people present, it is the wolfhound, not the Dane, who gets the attention.

It has to do with presence: Great Danes are dogs, even the very big ones. They are magnificent, fantastic dogs, we have had Danes in our family almost from the first day, and I love them to bits. But in the final analysis, they are big dogs.

Irish wolfhounds are not big dogs, they are huge personalities in furry coats. They demand attention, command attention, and reward attention by reacting to it, as though bestowing on the attendant their blessing. They fill a space much bigger than their mere form, and they make an indelible impression.

We were treated to the perfect example of this phenomenon a couple of years or so ago. We had already been doing therapy dog work for a while with the Mighty Wallace, our first wolfhound, a 75 kg [165 pound] furry person who was loved by (almost) all who met him.

On a particular Sunday, we had taken Wallace and one of the

other dogs with us to a tea garden that permitted Wallace and friend to sit by the table. As we were enjoying a leisurely brunch, a family came into the tea garden, and spotted Wallace. The father came over and asked if Wallace was an Irish Wolfhound, to which we replied that he was. He then shocked us all by asking why it was that Wallace was so small, and proceeded to regale us with a story of how, lying in hospital a few weeks previously, he had been visited by this wolfhound who was at very least a foot taller than Wallace at the shoulder, and at least double his weight.

I bit my tongue, as Wallace at the time was the only wolfhound in our area doing hospital visits, and aside from that, I had remembered the man in question.

In this case, and I suspect in many others, it is not the physical size that made the impression, it is the presence.

Many people over many centuries have commented on the fact that wolfhounds are more like people than dogs. Aside from their presence, it is the keen intelligence in their eyes, their quick minds, their very real sense of humour, and their individual take on things. Every wolfhound I have ever met has had a very individual personality.

Why do they have these characteristics?

It might have in small part something to do with the fact that they are sighthounds, but that is not all of it, not by a long way.

Perhaps it is their size and speed?

There have been intriguing studies done on the correlation between brain size and body size. If we look at modern animals,

larger organisms, for the most part, have bigger brains. This has to do with the fact that the brains need more space just to cope with the input from the larger bodies.

But the thinking portion of the brains is also larger. Some researchers claim this is simply to allow better input processing, but is it? There does seem to be some small correlation between brain size and intelligence, particularly within a species or related species groups.

Which of course will have the agility specialists with their collies jumping up and down in anger, but I am not talking here about a reaction to training. I am quite happy to concede that it is easier to train other dog breeds. No, I am talking about the kind of intelligence that defines a sense of self, and a sense of humour, and a personality.

Look into an Irish Wolfhound's eyes if you are not sure that this is true. It will only take a few instants to convince you of the intelligence and personality that lurks behind the fur mask.

Human beings use humour to help us interact with each other. It disarms us, reduces the chance of conflict, and opens lines of communication.

The horse comment might be inane, but it is an inane way of opening a conversation about a truly remarkable animal. There is a very real possibility that the person who made the comment is genuinely taken with your wolfhound.

Perhaps the best response to this is one in which people learn about the wonders of these special hounds, and have the chance to interact with one on a personal level.

If nothing else, by facilitating such a meeting, you are measurably improving the life of the person meeting with your hound, and the world will be, even if in just a small way, a better place.

A Scot who has lived in South Africa for most of his life, Philip, along with his wife Jana, looks after a huddle of Irish Wolfhounds and Great Danes. While Philip now spends most of his time as a computer systems engineer, he previously worked for a newspaper, and still writes the occasional article on Wolfhound related topics. In his spare time, Philip assists at a dog training school, and takes part in therapy dog work with the wolfhounds.