

Quality dogs are not a mouse click away:

Why Irish Wolfhounds sold over the Internet are dangerous for the breed

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The referred person sounded suspicious. Having being interested in Irish Wolfhounds for many years, this was the time to finally make the dream come true. (No, this fact itself is not suspicious.) While reading the questionnaire we send out every time when answering a puppy inquiry, I noticed that the potential new owner had a mixed toy dog before which, “unfortunately, was neutered when picked up from the Humane Society.”

“Unfortunately?” I wondered, and kept reading. A few lines down I learned that the new owner was unwilling to spay or neuter the new puppy at an appropriate age. This wasn’t a reason to get bend out of shape, either, as altering a hound should not be a law carved in stone. The rationale, however, was interesting. “My brother was always so sad that my dog from the pound was neutered because he wanted his mix female to have pups. So we are not going to have anything spayed or neutered anymore.”

When asked for clarification, the person acknowledged they wanted to breed the pup one day, and maybe go to a few shows. His e-mail ended with the statement that “shows are not really important”. That was the final blow for his application, and I wished him good luck for the future. I knew that no ethical breeder would risk that any of his or her beloved babies may end up being used indiscriminately for breeding in the backyard of a novice owner.

Time went by, and on one of my routine visits to the Internet I realized that the same person had now reserved a newborn male pup from a kennel whose detailed online instructions made it possible to buy an Irish Wolfhound puppy without ever speaking a single word to one another. Organized like a business for selling, say, a car, the website contained information about the breeding stock, including height and weight, pedigrees and pictures.

Available litters were announced on the day they were born, and each puppy was immediately photographed. The website had additional information regarding kennel philosophy and breed guidelines, i.e. standard, puppy care, shipping, reservation and payment, FAQ’s and testimonials from satisfied costumers. Last, but not least, prices were announced openly, and a copy of the sales contract was ready to be downloaded.

Wow! This was amazing! I decided to check the site out beyond the first few pages. I learned that anybody in search for a pup could complete a simple form, asking to be contacted when puppies became available. Within the first few hours after birth, people are automatically informed about number of pups, their colors, and their parents.

People may then reserve their baby just by looking at one single picture, paying a deposit through one of the many accepted payment methods, such as credit cards via Paypal. The deposit is tied to a particular puppy and non-refundable so no business is lost due to a sudden change of mind. After that, the only thing left to do is to wait until the little one is ready to go to its new home.

Surprisingly, all puppies are sold with a full AKC registration, and the fact that they are basically sold or at least reserved within their first week of life indicates that the breeders don't keep any of them. The contract displays other important information of how this kennel operates. It states that the pup is ready to be placed at 6 weeks of age, or at 8 weeks, if it is shipped, and that all puppies are of show quality. This must be a super kennel!

The truth is far from that, and – unfortunately – the anxious and naïve novice owners have no clue. If they did, they would realize that this particular kennel has been in the breed for a handful of years, producing litter after litter and hardly ever keep anything. The quality of their hounds, according to the pictures, is questionable. They look scrawny, and none of the pictures display a stacked picture at a show. Showing to compare stock with other breeders does not seem to be important.

The announced heights of the hounds cannot be correct, and even if they were, the respective weights of the hounds indicate that these dogs have no substance. Some bitches at this kennel don't even meet the weight requirement by the standard. And, no hound is older than 4 years, so how can these people advertise their lines as sound, healthy and long living, especially since being in the breed for only a short time?

Last, but not least, there is no warranty for the puppy above the first 72-hours, and this warranty only includes fatal deformations and infections and unsatisfactory health problems making the pup unfit for future breeding. In addition, the website does not inform about any health tests performed on the breeding stock prior to breeding. The longer I scrolled down the pages, the more desperate I became. I could not find a single question where the breeders mentioned anything they would ask a potential owner. Obviously

anybody was fit and good enough to be a wolfhound owner, as long as they could pay for it right away.

This example is not an individual case. It represents a trend, which is dangerous for our breed. Irish Wolfhounds, once the privilege and pride of kings and queens and a rare find, seem to turn into an instant accessory for Jane and Joe Doe. The Internet spits out site after site of puppy nets and dog breeder net sites, and each of them contains at least ten ads of people trying to sell their expected, newborn or six-month old litters, followed by the older ones who are “super show quality in all colors, family raised”. Interestingly, I have never heard of any of these people who advertise in these online forums, nor have I seen a single one of their hounds at a Specialty. Buyers beware: What is readily available is often a nightmare away.

How is it possible that people buy from such sources? Does the wish to own a quality animal from an ethical breeder succumb to instant gratification and/or to the validation of one’s check book? Is it that no questions are asked by the online contacts, helping wolfhounds become available for simply anybody? Is it the fact that the pups are sold with unlimited registrations, making them eligible to be bred - the dog may as well earn its keep? Or is it that the puppy supply of ethical breeders is so limited that potential new owners have to go elsewhere?

Of one the dilemmas seems to be that our time is the enemy of patience. People want things over night. Nothing is worth waiting for anymore. That may be ok if one is after a fancy car or a yacht or a new house. But when one is after a living being the trend becomes quite dangerous.

The social change affects the way people perceive things. A dog or a cat may not firstly and simply be a beloved companion anymore, helping one to get through tough times by unconditional love and faith. It has morphed into a payable good, which can be disposed of after use or after a problem in functioning shows up. As many people out there know how to utilize this social change for their financial benefit, everything and anything can be replaced. Providing a constant and easily accessible supply of something over a long time leads to devaluation, and the Irish Wolfhound is threatened to follow the millions of unwanted pets each year who are abandoned (or even worse).

The fact that wolfhounds from the described kennel or other breeders advertising in online puppy nets are being sold with unlimited registrations, makes the dilemma even more tragic as it adds another problem: The

majority of people buying these hounds want to use their rights to breed from them – but not for the better of the breed. It seems that if one spends a high price for something, it better proves to be worth of the investment. So, not only are a high number of pet quality wolfhounds sold with full registration by dubious people, they also become part of a breeding machinery. In a few years, when these owners and new breeders realize that their hounds have problems or are not worth their money or simply get bored with them (after all, all new toys get boring sooner or later), they will be turned over to the rescue organizations. We may be getting swamped with hounds of which nothing is going to remind us what a typical Irish Wolfhound looks like.

As the long time breeders who have been in the breed for decades, educating sponge-like novices on a regular basis, decline in numbers, new breeders need to show what they have learned from their mentors, and that that they were worth the time spent on them. It is up to the next generation to step up to the plate and take responsibility for what we all so commonly call “our treasure”. But the number of young, ethical breeders coming up is limited, and so is the number of their litters.

If one compares their numbers to the number of folks who grow like mushrooms on a rainy day in the Internet forest, one may feel a shiver running down the spine. In a few decades, we may face the worst scenario yet to come: The majority of Irish Wolfhounds in the USA looks like mutants and are bred by people who are in for the money. How can we who we call ourselves “fanciers of the breed” allow that pride and privilege of royalty turns into man’s best moneymakers?

Yes, there may be a shortage of quality pups from ethical breeders. But they simply do not breed every bitch every year, and take great pride to find the best males for their litters, even if that means driving long distances to him, spending valuable time and money. And they screen their potential buyers with eagle eyes, as they love their four-legged babies just as much the two-legged ones and want them to be well-cared for, happy and healthy. But even the best screening tools fail sometimes, and the home, which sounded perfect on paper, is not worth the ink. So, how does one determine whether to trust someone or not? Isn’t the golden rule of breeding “If in doubt, don’t!” and shouldn’t that apply to puppy people as well?

I wonder whether there is something wrong with the breed education we provide. We educate judges, novices and ourselves; we illustrate standards

and put pictures of winning hounds on our club websites. We organize fun days and fun matches and grooming workshops and picnics and god knows what else. But who comes to these events - mostly the ones who come year after year. And who looks at illustrated standards and pictures of specialties? Breeders. So, how is it possible that we don't reach these valuable first time owners and keep losing them to unethical breeders, or better "reproducers"?

Maybe we are too old fashioned. We learned that the best way to "shop" for a hound was to go out and get educated, no matter how much time or money it cost. We were told to visit different breeders, squeeze them out like a lemon to know with whom we are dealing with, and we were happy and thankful to get a pup after a year or so of waiting. When we started breeding, our mentors prohibited to ever advertising in the local newspaper or supermarket. "Only bad people do that!" I remember being told.

But times have changed, and so has the Irish Wolfhound. Maybe we breeders should, too. Life became faster, people more mobile and connected, and the way we can share information these days is scary at times. Clever people also realized that people simply lack the time to really go out and shop for something, and that the best and fastest way to adapt to this new species of customer is the Internet. Comfortably sitting at home during a winter storm, with a nice cup of hot tea in one hand and the mouse in the other, we can buy anything our heart desires, and nobody stops us. Did we wolfhound breeders miss this turning point?

It seems to me that the Internet with its potential is treated like a stepchild. Maybe we need to re-think and start treating it a bit better, utilizing it to our own benefit. If one dubious kennel can sell almost 20 puppies in one week, why can't we make our club websites, the sites of ethical breeders, and any additional information like flyers and pamphlets become priority search results instead of all the online puppy and breeder nets? We could also design a breeder referral site with the contact information of breeders whose ethical standards are so high that even we as breeders would happily buy from them.

If novice owners don't come to us, maybe we need to go to them and organize an informative afternoon at the local dog club. Other breeds suffer as well. We could also send information out to local clubs, which they could distribute at their shows. Or we can put ads in these local newspapers reminding people to buy from responsible sources so they have actually options. These are just ideas.

Maybe, if we all join forces (and yes: a few baby steps have been taken already) we could prevent some of these “hostile takeovers.” Not everybody will listen, I am aware of this, but accepting this dangerous trend as a natural development is too easy. We owe it to our hounds to fight for them, for their reputation and their pride. And at the end of our life as breeders, when we look out of the window, seeing our last generation happily running around, shouldn't we all be able to say: “I did all I could”?

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