

Novice Owner - Perfect Victim!?

By Christiana C. Hartenstein

Naivete can be charming. A young girl knocking at the door of womanhood, how precious a time. Sweet, sweet sixteen. However, danger lurks around the corner. Naivete is so seductive. Look at Goethe's Faust. Hasn't he studied about anything and everything? Yet, he still doesn't know what life is all about. Poor, confused Gretchen! With Mephisto's guile and cunning, Faust pursues the virgin. She doesn't have the slightest clue she is (not only) flirting with disaster. Ultimately, Faust corrupts her and destroys her life. Quite a drama, don't you think?

Sometimes people trying to buy their first Irish Wolfhound can face a similar dilemma. Of course not to such an extent, but still. Where to get information, addresses, phone numbers? How to find contact to other owners, a reputable breeder? What to feed, how to train? The "Do's" and the "Don't's". So many questions, so many answers. But are the answers they eventually get always the right ones, and most of all, honest?

Anyone looking for an Irish Wolfhound has a wide range of options for obtaining one. The fastest: the internet. It turns the search for about anything into a matter of seconds. Nothing is easier than entering "Irish Wolfhound puppy". Here they come. Website after website, you can check out colours, age and price. On March 1, 2005 there was a website with 15 wolfhounds for sale, among them a newborn litter, an unborn litter promising "awesome puppies" with shipping worldwide and several puppies of different age. Available immediately, a phone call or an e-mail away. Novice wolfhounds are thrilled. Is it really that easy? What they don't know is that most of these cute little faces are being sold by puppymills which have only one thing in mind: breeding dogs of different breeds around the clock to make a profit. Once the puppy is shipped, you are forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind.

Entering any combination containing "Irish Wolfhound" show, among others, personal websites of breeders and kennels inviting you to share "many successful years" in the breed. You read heartwarming stories of "How I became a breeder", admire pictures of countless champions, click on "pedigrees" to find names which sound wonderfully strange and last, but not least, you succumb to these irresistible puppy pictures of the advertised latest litter. 13 puppies? Oh my god, aren't they cute? Again, after a few e-

mails and phone calls, a puppy is booked. But does the soon- to- be owner really know anything about the quality of the puppies? Or their parents? Their longevity? Their health problems? And how many puppies leave this particular kennel per year? Most likely not. If you read the guestbooks of personal websites, you learn how easy it is to impress a novice. Yes, the internet can be a blessing. But it is also a curse.

So what about going to a near by All Breed Show, see the dogs, talk to breeders? Actually, this is a good idea. There is nothing better than seeing the dog you always dreamt of in flesh and blood. The size, the fuzzy face, the beautiful eyes. At ring side, you watch the dogs (more or less) masterfully handled and you are wondering how a judge can ever make a decision whom to award the ribbons. Because to the novice eye, all wolfhounds look alike, and they are all beautiful. What many novices now do is ask the owner or breeder of the winner, if a litter is planned or better, already on the ground. A puppy by a winning kennel is considered a good decision. However, some wolfhounds doing well at All Breed Shows are rather poor specimens and lack the quality required by the standard. Again, the novice does not know this.

Despite the fact that many future wolfhounds fall even deeper in love with the breed after spending time at an All Breed Show, such a show is hard business. It is not only a competition for points, but also for puppy homes. It is a platform for breeders of any breed to advertise their kennels and sell dogs. You see big kennel signs with pictures of champions and available puppies. Of course everyone is nice and friendly to potential buyers. However, in some cases, the necessity of selling dogs is bigger than the obligation of telling the truth. Yes, there are many honest, dedicated breeders at these shows who do not denigrate their peers, but there are always some out who try to convince the newcomer that only they have good dogs and better not to buy from this or that competitor. For this kind of breeder, being active in a club comes for sure handy, but - unfortunately - not for the right reasons. Abuse of power is old news and hard to see for the novice. Breeders of integrity do not need to take such actions to have people look at their dogs.

Maybe something needs to be explained at that point. Many novice wolfhound owners do not really care how their first dog looks like or where it comes from. All they want is a tall and big dog, taller and bigger than anything else around, sweet and fluffy, who is good with kids and easy to handle. In a way, this is not bad at all. It shows that this kind of home loves

the dog for what it is and doesn't abuse it as a personal ego trip. They pick their puppy based on the cuteness factor, maybe on the colour. If that's what they want, there is nothing wrong with going out and buy this very first available puppy and live, depending on whether they get lucky with their purchase, (more or less) happily ever after. But how many owners find out only later that their wolfhound either looks like a mutant, has serious health problems with no breeder around to help or a temperament problem which makes it impossible to handle the animal? Quite a few. Because when choosing their 2nd wolfhound, people in general are more careful and selective from whom to buy. Not only because experience made them a bit wiser, but also because they have contacts with their local club and other owners.

Local clubs are a good way of getting acquainted with the Irish Wolfhound world. Offering a wide range of activities like seminars, workshops, coursing, training classes and participation in parades, picnicks, fun days and walks allow novices and owners to learn about the breed. They send out information and offer tips on literature. Some clubs have an annual Fun Match where novices can see dogs of different kennels without visiting each single one of them. This way, they can find out which type of dog they like, an important factor when it comes to booking a puppy. This time, you might not get the first one available again because you are now going to make a conscious decision. The local club in general is also very well informed about who has puppies available at the time you are looking. People are being referred to breeders in good standing with the club who then have different ways of figuring out whom to put on their waiting list or not. Another advantage local clubs have is that people can volunteer at events and get a look even behind the scenes.

Some people do not have a local club or other wolfhound owners nearby and are more or less on their own. For them, to contact the Irish Wolfhound Club of America is maybe the only option. People who have been involved with the breed for many years are elected into the board of the club to support and promote the breed. At request, you will receive information about the breed and referrals to breeders if you are looking for a puppy. However, even a club with the best intentions consists only of humans, and none of them is flawless. So how does the novice know that the puppy list he receives really contains all litters available and not only the ones which are "sponsored"? Some breeders in good standing with certain club or board members never seem to have problems finding homes for their puppies, whether they breed 10 litters a year or only 1, whereas other breeders don't get a single referral.

Is this fair? Or is this politics? No, and yes. Again, the novice who trusts the information he gets does not hear the whole truth, is unknowingly manipulated and therefore, does not really have a choice. Novice owner - perfect victim.

So what can a novice really do to avoid this dilemma? The most important thing is to take a lot of time to get educated before buying a wolfhound. Since being patient is nothing most people are good at, it might not sound very exciting at the beginning. But it pays off in the long run. Because the more the novice knows about the breed, the better a chance he has for getting a quality puppy from a reputable, honest breeder, even if it is only meant to be a pet. Reading hasn't killed anyone, yet, and watching videos on the breed can be quite entertaining. The next step could be shows, including specialties, to start looking at wolfhounds. Even the most untrained eye will find some dogs he likes better than others, and that might not be the ones winning on that particular day. The more dogs are being looked at, the better the eye should develop. And the more often a novice takes time to spend learning about all aspects of the breed, the sooner he will know what to expect, what to look for and where to find it.

Now it is time to go and visit kennels, look at their dogs, see how they are being taken care of, and talk to breeders. To develop a feeling for the breeder is crucial. Is he or she competent, informative, does the novice feel in good hands, or does he get the impression of being only interesting when it is time to pick up the puppy and pay for it? Not only does the breeder have the right to ask numerous questions, also the potential buyer should interview the breeder. How many puppies leave the kennel per year, which health problems run in the lines, which tests were done on the parents of the litter in case there is one on the ground, what was the reason for this particular litter, what if they cannot keep the puppy for a reason - these questions are all legitimate. A reputable breeder will tell you honestly what his or her old dogs died from and at what age. Someone who tries telling a novice they never had this or that health problem is not trustworthy. Everyone long enough in wolfhounds knows that this is a lie - all breeders share the same problems. A good breeder is a constant source of help and advise, as long as the dog lives, and requires at least loose contact over the years.

A novice who has made his homework should by now know which dogs he likes best and which breeder he trusts so he can imagine him or her being around for the next years. He will then go ahead and decide to obtain a

puppy from the current litter or reserve one for later. Even if that means to wait (again). Novice owner - perfect victim? Not necessarily.

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