

A Reply to Suggested Changes in the Standard

L. O. Starbuck

Irish Wolfhound Club of America Yearbook 1934/5. pp. 56-59

L. O. Starbuck and his wife Alma, kennel "Ambleside", were one of the earliest Irish Wolfhound breeders in North America, breeding from the 1920's well into the 1960's. When a group of relative newcomers to the breed tried to change the Irish Wolfhound standard, Mr. Starbuck published the following column, giving his own, as well as many other breeders' opinions on this idea. We would like to reproduce this short article here, as its contents are as actual today as they were when it was first published.

The opinions given are those of:

*Mr. L. O. Starbuck, "Ambleside", USA
Mrs. Florence Nagle, "Sulhamstead", England
Mr. K. P. Strohmenger, "Coval", England
Miss Mabel S. Kearns, "Southwick", England
Mr. Isaac W. Everett, "Felixstowe", England
Miss Phyllis Gardner, "Coolafin", England/Ireland
Capt. and Mrs. Hudson, "Brabyns", England
Mrs. Norwood B. Smith, "Cragwood", USA*

We hope you will find these useful.

During the past year, there has been two or three attempts, made by members of the Club, to have our standard either revised or amplified. Upon investigation, this proved to be a small minority, and included some of those who had been active in the breed the least number of years. All of the older breeders were in accord that the standard meets the requirements and most of the newcomers were of like opinion. It has been found in breed clubs, that it is the young fancier who usually wants to change the standard. It is often the first symptom of interest, and as such it is to be respected, since it is the first fresh impressions in any work that often give birth to constructive changes later on.

However, the standard of the Irish Wolfhound is not the same in principle as the majority of other standards, since our standard describes the ancient hound, and the endeavour is to breed a hound that will approach as near as possible, in the fullest of perfection, this type of hound. Whereas, with many other breeds, they are changed from year to year, and with the passing of the years these fanciers breed to meet present-day requirements.

They would be horrified if one were to suggest that they revert to the type of their breed described in the earliest data regarding it. I can almost say, this is true of the majority of breeds, but the opposite is true of the Irish Wolfhound. The desire in this breed is to again produce the old hound in all his glory.

This is altogether too big a subject to be covered in this column at one time, and I have deferred bringing it up as I hardly thought it wise to mention it so briefly.

However, I have at hand opinions that I think others interested in the breed would enjoy, and I feel they should be passed on to you.

Shortly after the question of revision was introduced, I wrote to several of the leading breeders in England for their views on the standard. Our standard is comparatively brief in expression, and I asked if amplification had ever been considered. The important things are accurately and concisely stated, and these simple facts establish a safe and satisfactory principle for breeding as all seem to think who have abided by the standard a number of years, and who have used it faithfully.

It may seem to have a bit of leeway to some at the beginning, but only time can prove the wisdom of this, as anything that describes a species of life cannot be too detailed, else it will be a hindrance. Inventions of the human mind may be described in minute detail, as they, at the best, are limited. The brevity of our standard safeguards the breed and provides for its growth.

The first to reply to my query regarding the standard, was Mrs. Florence Nagle, Secretary of the Irish Wolfhound Club of England, and also the Irish Wolfhound Coursing Club. Mrs. Nagle says:

"Hands off the standard. I do not believe in too much amplification of giving the points in greater detail. It is a great mistake to tie a judge down to too many details that are not half so important as the dog as a whole. I think the standard is a good one and perfectly adequate to convey to any judge what an Irish Wolfhound should be. Novices in a breed get to that stage where a little knowledge is dangerous, and finding they cannot breed to the standard wish to alter it to fit their dogs. In cattle breeding, where they have tried the system of judging on points, it has been a ghastly failure. You may get an animal that appears to have every small point right, but is not an Irish Wolfhound at all.

"The Club, over here, is well satisfied with the standard as it is. I think the general appearance should be of a Deerhound, but on much more substantial and powerful lines. We must keep to the curves of the Deerhound and avoid the square cut look of the Dane. At one time, over here, we were getting them too square cut like a Shorthorn Bullock. That type has spring of rib, but is like a barrel without depth of brisket. Also the heads were getting rectangular, like an Airedale. But there has been an improvement back to the head with the right amount of breadth of skull coming to a comparative point as the standard asks for.

"There has been a marked improvement in soundness over here, and no Wolfhound has a chance of winning unless he is perfectly sound behind. That is the reason they are doing so well in the varieties (open to any breed) and winning so many best in show.

"A sense of proportion is what is wanted in judging, but altering the standard will not make bad judges into good ones. And the good ones can be safely left to interpret our present one to the best advantage."

And from K. P. Strohmenger, hon. Treasurer of the Irish Wolfhound Club of England, whose family has long been connected with Irish Wolfhound interests and responsible for much of the Club's growth, comes this pertinent reply:

"If newcomers to the breed have the audacity to state that the average judge of an Irish Wolfhound cannot interpret the standard of the breed upon which Capt. Graham spent so much time, then the only thing I can say is that that particular judge is not worthy of judging Irish Wolfhounds.

"I am quite sure that the very last thing any breeders and exhibitors of Irish Wolfhounds in this county would want to alter was our standard of type.

"Everyone, when going into something new, considers that something ought to be changed, and it is always found that these people are very revolutionary in their ideas.

"Surely the old and experienced breeders and exhibitors of Irish Wolfhounds ought to know best, and I think that I am voicing the opinion of them all when I state that the present standard of type, which was edited by Capt. Graham way back in the 1880's, is as correct to-day as ever it was."

Miss Mabel S. Kearns, a successful and popular breeder, exhibitor, and judge of this breed for many years, says:

"I think it would be a great pity to change the standard. It is a very good description of what we want, and I do not think any amplification is needed to help the novice."

From I. W. Everett, England's oldest active breeder, comes the following:

"I sat on the Committee which was arranged to consider and discuss this same subject in 1898 or somewhere about then. It was in the latter days of Capt. Graham. He, Major P. S. Shewell, the late J. F. Bailey, and a few others, including myself, were on the committee. The outcome was the present standard.

"I have, every now and again, gone through it since that time, trying to find out if there were any points which needed correction in any way, and I failed to find them.

"One thing I do feel about our breed is, in some quarters, there is a great effort being made to work into our bench hounds a rather overdone condition of trimming up, which is, in some cases, pretty pronounced. This, I feel, should be severely dealt with. It very greatly detracts from the correct appearance – the actual Irish Wolfhound type."

Miss Phyllis Gardner has contributed much to the available data to be had concerning our breed, and she says:

"As to your remarks on the standard, I think it is an excellent one, and if you breed a hound conforming to it in every particular it is sure to be a good hound."

And Capt. and Mrs. T. H. Hudson, well known on both sides of the Atlantic in this breed, remark:

"We are both of the opinion that it would be a pity to interfere with the present standard in any way. If a hound is good enough to conform perfectly to everyone of

the 16 points in the standard of excellence, he will need no alteration. I think you will find this is the opinion of the majority of breeders of any importance in this country."

I cannot give any more opinions at this time. The very instructive suggestions given in many of these letters will be passed on at some future time. In closing, I am going to quote our own past president, Mrs. Norwood B. Smith, America's oldest, active breeder, and one of the three charter members of the Irish Wolfhound Club of America, still active. Mrs. Smith's rapier thrust at any proposed standard change is as follows:

"Judging is an art. No amount of reading would make a Landseer* out of every aspirant. No standard is foolproof. Ours is O.K. for a person with 'doggy knowledge' or an eye for a dog. A poor workman usually blames his tools. Our standard was written for the future by men with vision and most of us do not feel we have outgrown it.

* Edwin Landseer (1802-1873), famous English animal painter. Red.