

OBEDIENCE : THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

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As an animal behavior consultant, I must evaluate and treat animals with severe behavior problems. I treasure the same qualities in my Irish Wolfhounds that other Irish Wolfhound owners do; and after a behavior consultation in which I may have worked with the distraught owner of a dog that has inflicted a severe bite, it is gratifying to come home to my gentle, well-mannered, quiet Irish Wolfhounds. Given the wonderful qualities of the Irish Wolfhound as a companion, one might expect to see a number of them in the obedience ring. Yet, while their presence there is becoming a more common sight, relatively few Irish Wolfhounds have earned obedience degrees. This can best be understood in terms of the characteristics of the breed, the nature of traditional training methods, and the requirements of the obedience exercises in competition. With the emergence of training techniques based on positive reinforcement, we can expect more Irish Wolfhounds to excel in the obedience ring, since these techniques are more suited to the nature of the breed. It is important for Irish Wolfhound owners to understand these issues as they affect the selection of training goals and methods.

According to the principle of biological preparedness behavioral predispositions make it easier for certain animals to learn particular tasks. Rats are found to be better than graduate students at solving mazes, not because graduate students are stupid, but because rats are naturally inclined to find their way along tunnels and follow complicated routes. A rat easily learns to press a bar with its foot, while a pigeon tends to peck at it. In the same way, certain breeds of dogs, such as Border Collies and Golden Retrievers, have behavioral tendencies that allow them to learn and perform the obedience trial tasks more easily than do our Irish Wolfhounds. For example, a great deal of sitting is called for in obedience competition. Dogs are expected to sit at the owner's side after each "halt" in heeling; sit for a "stay" exercise; and sit three times during the recall exercise. In fact, during the Novice routine, the dog may be required to "sit" a dozen or more times during five minutes or less. Most dogs, and some Irish Wolfhounds, are comfortable with this requirement and learn the exercises easily. Other Irish Wolfhounds (like many other sighthounds), do not find sitting a natural or comfortable position, perhaps due to the particular conformation of their spine and legs. If left to their own devices, they will choose to stand or lie down; some must even be taught how to assume the sitting position. Wolves also assume the sitting position less frequently than do most domestic dogs.

Another obedience trial task for which many Irish Wolfhounds are not naturally inclined is retrieving. It is much easier to train an animal to perform an act if the act is one that is already included in the animal's behavioral repertoire. While many dogs enjoy retrieving and perform this task during play (and indeed do it over and over obsessively), many Irish Wolfhounds do not include retrieving in their behavioral repertoire. Some have never completed the entire behavioral sequence of going to the thrown object, picking it up in their mouth, and delivering the object to their owner. When it becomes evident what the owner wants the hound to do, some hounds look at their owner in amazement as if to say, "You want a retriever? Buy a Golden!"

Sitting and retrieving may not come as naturally to your Irish Wolfhound as they do to the average dog; neither does the degree of precision called for in the obedience ring. There is no practical reason for a companion dog to respond with the degree of precision that is called for in the obedience ring. The competition obedience exercises have become extremely stylized, rather like an Arthur Murray dance routine, with the handler executing precise footwork, turns, and moves.

Competition heeling is now sometimes compared to dancing with your dog, and bears little relation to what you or your dog would actually do on a walk. Irish Wolfhounds tend to be more laid-back and casual in their attitude, rather than conscientious and work-ethic oriented as are some dogs. If Irish Wolfhounds were people, one could imagine them reclining on a chaise lounge, sipping a drink with an umbrella in it, rather than worrying about work left undone. They are a dog of leisure, and of humor. Yet, while some of these characteristics of the breed add to their charm and are part of what makes Irish Wolfhounds so easy to live with, these traits can hinder their performance in the obedience ring. Linda Hagan, who has instructed obedience classes since 1973 and whose Irish Wolfhound was High In Trial at the Potomac Valley Irish Wolfhound Specialty in 1992 writes in a letter to me:

Before my first Wolfhound, I owned mostly working breeds. The occasional sighthound owner would attend my classes and complain that their hound's lack of good response was due to "sighthound temperament". My standard reply was, "Look, a dog is a dog. Just stick with the program. " I always wrote them off as inept trainers. Their dogs eventually got trained, but they never lost the "hound trainer's frustrated face

When I began training my first Wolfhound... well, let's just say she taught me a thing or two ... Irish Wolfhounds are extremely intelligent, much more so than any sporting or working breed I have ever trained.... intelligence is not to be confused with willingness to obey a command. . . Sometimes, when I am working with my young Boru, he will just stop and stare at me, refusing the command. He will stare at me for a long while, the eyes laughing, --- at what? I wonder. I wait, just to see what he will do. Then the eyes tell me, ever so eloquently, that after carefully considering the command, he has decided that he will, just for me, honor this request.

But only ... just for me.

The temperament of the breed, when combined with some traditional training methods, may affect its ability to excel in the obedience ring. Traditional obedience training methods, as they were practiced when the activity developed in the 1930s, derived from those used in the training of military dogs during World War 1.

Some exercises, such as jumping, were included in the AKC obedience trials primarily because of their crowd-pleasing aspects. Little was known about how to train dogs to perform these tasks except for those methods used in training military or hunting dogs. Traditional dog training has been based upon what is euphemistically called "collar corrections", i.e., collar and leash jerks, along with physical pushing, pulling, slapping, and harsh verbal commands and reprimands; in other words, punishment. The dog would learn to obey in order to avoid these aversive consequences. While many dogs will respond to these methods by acting apologetic and redoubling their efforts (this is what people often mean when they say a dog is "eager to please") Irish Wolfhounds usually do not. They have a characteristic that, I believe, indicates good mental health. Irish Wolfhounds are not masochists. If they perceive they are being treated roughly, unpleasantly, or unjustly, Irish Wolfhounds often shut down mentally. Sometimes you can almost see and hear the "click" as they tune out, go on "automatic pilot", or resign themselves to going through the motions until their owners regain their sanity. Celeste Thaller of Efland, NC, describes her dog's experience using these methods:

About six years ago, I enrolled my one-year-old pit bull bitch, Bobby, in an obedience class offered by the local parks and recreation department. She was very attached to me, poorly socialized, and did whatever she wanted. My goal in attending the class was to gain complete control over Bobby. I particularly wanted her to come when called no matter what the situation. She had shown no aggressive tendencies, but I felt this control I hoped to gain would allay my fears in regard to her potential to harm another animal or person.

There were over twenty dogs in our class. We were told the first night that by the end of the eight-week session our dogs would come when we called them, and would stay when we said stay. I was impressed!

We began with heel in a circle. Loudly, and with deep voice we were instructed to give the proper command, "HEEL BOBBY" At the same moment we were to walk out quickly and give the leash, attached to the chain choke collar, a good smart jerk. "Yip", Bobby said, and we were off--- well sort of. More loud commands, more smart jerks. Needless to say she got the idea: learning stinks! Sitting our dogs involved some well-planned timing. "Sit Bobby!", jerk, "Yip, " smack on the rump.

We practiced dutifully at home for five minutes a day. And, yes at the end of the eight-week session she performed just as prophesized, except only with a choke collar on, and only in our obedience training mode. She's seven now, very attached to me, poorly socialized, and still does whatever she wants.

According to Cecilia Hoffinan, of Charlottesville, Virginia, who has worked successfully with a number of her Irish Wolfhounds in obedience:

All of my hounds are very sensitive, and harsh corrections are counterproductive. They work because they like to please, not because they are forced to. . . the hounds feel hurt if they are corrected because as far as they are concerned you are being unreasonable.

Wolfhounds ... are very intelligent and rapidly pick up what you want them to do ... they figure out short cuts to get there ... You cannot drill a wolfhound for hours on an exercise. You merely work until they do it right once, then quit. Additional repetitions bore them and they quickly get creative in ways to liven up the routine. Frequent, short lessons are more productive than one long session. I may work stays while cleaning a run, or practice heeling on the way outside. I rarely work more than 15 minutes at any one time with an individual dog.

One aspect of competition to be aware of is that fatigue is the enemy of the obedience Irish Wolfhound, and the longer they have to wait around, the greater the chance that they will get "the slows". It seems ironic that Irish Wolfhounds and other sighthounds, capable of great speed, can also be such slow moving creatures in obedience competition. When they are mentally or physically stressed in any way, Irish Wolfhounds are inclined to do everything in slow motion.

They may sit with the utmost deliberation. When heeling off lead, may lag to the point of standing still and watching the owner do the heeling pattern in embarrassed solitude. They seem to realize that you are not really going anywhere and are going to end up exactly where you started. I have sometimes wondered what would happen if the owner just stepped over the ring barrier and headed off into the distance, as I'm sure some are tempted to do. This hypokinetic behavior does not necessarily mean the hound has been improperly trained. One show per weekend is often the best plan, as scores usually decline over a three-show weekend. Part of the reason Border Collies, Golden Retrievers and other sporting, working and herding breeds do so well in obedience trials is their energy level and constantly "up" personality, which also helps them tolerate repetition and constant practice. Some top obedience dogs must be "warmed up" or drilled for hours before going into the ring. Most Irish Wolfhound owners would not be accustomed to living with such an energetic creature. Irish Wolfhounds, in fact, tend to improve in performance if they do not practice too much. My best obedience score was earned after three years of not practicing at all.

Your Irish Wolfhound does not have to be trained for obedience competition in order to be an enjoyable companion. General deQuoy, in his classic book, "The Irish Wolfhound Guide", (Cahill & Co. Limited, 1973, page 210, 223) observes:

A person who objects to training a dog in obedience is really objecting to the type or degree of training ... When I say that all Irish Wolfhounds should be trained, I do not mean that they should receive the same training as would be needed to obtain degrees in obedience trials. It is not absolutely necessary, for example, that they should be taught to jump obstacles on command, or to select out of many articles one bearing your scent.

Although General deQuoy's Irish Wolfhounds have earned two U.D.s, four C.D.X.s and twelve C.D.s, he writes:

I do not believe that I shall again attempt to qualify any Irish Wolfhound for a C.D.X or U.D. degree. I have always been fearful of injury to the dogs, especially when jumping 3feet high indoors. My decision not to show in these classes is due to the following three convictions.. I know that the dogs can easily be trained to jump; any injury would cause pain to the dog; a condition might be created which would cause the dog to limp and thus prevent him from being shown in breed.

Obedience training usually cannot solve or prevent specific behavior problems. Many of the dogs referred to me for behavior problems have been through obedience classes. Some have graduated at the top of their class or have obedience titles. For specific behavior problems, it is more useful to view obedience training as a possible adjunct to the total treatment program. However, obedience training, if done in a positive manner, is helpful in improving your dog's self-esteem, building confidence, and in learning ways to change your dog's behavior. Dog trainers are discovering or rediscovering how to use positive reinforcement more effectively and to rely less upon punishment. Thus, obedience training in the 1990s can be very different from what it was twenty years ago when most of the methods used were particularly unsuited to the nature of Irish Wolfhounds. Knowledge derived from the considerable body of scientific literature on learning in animals, including humans, has been slow to penetrate the traditionalist arena of dog training. However, learning theory terminology has recently begun to be applied (not always correctly!) to dog training. Now some dog trainers can discuss schedules of reinforcement, learning curves, and conditioned stimuli with a familiarity that would have made B.F. Skinner proud. Karen Pryor's 1984 book, "Don't Shoot The Dog", published by Bantam Press, is one excellent source that discusses how these widely used methods for the training of dolphins and whales can be applied to dogs and humans. Compare Celeste Thaller's previous experience with Bobby to her recent experience with her Irish Wolfhound, Rose, in an obedience class that taught these methods:

My next occasion to try an obedience class again was with my 15-month-old Irish Wolfhound bitch, Rose. My primary goal in taking Rose to class was to build her confidence. My secondary goals were to build my confidence in her and to strengthen our relationship as partners through thick and thin.

We learned the exact same obedience exercises; however, the approach was entirely different. It was never once suggested that I jerk, smack, or yell at my dog. We "asked" them to do the exercise and rewarded with verbal and physical praise, and most importantly in the beginning, they were rewarded with food treats. The treats were used to actually guide the dogs into desired positions so they could be rewarded.

"Sit" was our first exercise, and Rose was very nervous. She couldn't focus on me long enough to even see the treat I was holding over her nose in an attempt to guide her back into a sitting position. Our instructor advised me to "break it down " and reward her initially for focusing on me and reaching for the treat. I fell so good when she could do this, and I was able to praise her and reward her. By the end of the first class she did sit! Small progress I thought, but at least she didn't seem so scared. And with each class, and each session at home her enthusiasm and confidence grew.

I was so proud. At the end of the eight week session we received evaluations, Rose was deemed the dog who made the most progress. From not being able to even sit to eager participant in fun; willing and quick-moving.

When I compare the two experiences, both times at the end of the sessions both dogs performed the expected exercises. However, Rose's behavior demonstrated she was having fun, Bobby just learned how to avoid unpleasantness. Rose and I continued to practice and plan to enroll in the next level class in the fall.

And for me personally I feel a different closeness with Rose now that we have been through class. I paid attention to her in class, I learned to watch for subtleties, she paid attention to me, she learned to watch for subtleties. Rose demonstrated greater confidence in stressful situations; I have confidence in her; we feel like partners.

Teaching by using inducement methods requires an effective positive reinforcer. A positive reinforcer is simply defined as anything that increases the probability of the occurrence of the behavior that preceded it. In the old system of training, verbal praise and petting were assumed to act as reinforcers whether they actually reinforced the behavior or not. For some dogs, cats and other creatures (perhaps those with high self-esteem) verbal praise and petting are not particularly reinforcing. They seem to have an attitude of "Well, yes, I know I am a good dog. What's your point?", particularly if they are showered with attention and affection all day long. For some dogs with a strong desire to retrieve or play, the opportunity to play with a ball or other object can be used as a positive reinforcer. While many Irish Wolfhounds are indifferent to this, it is possible to develop and strengthen this desire. In fact, one of the major challenges in training an Irish Wolfhound is in finding an effective positive reinforcer, a "motivator". Delicious food treats can often be used very effectively.

Although there is considerable prejudice attached to using food in training dogs, much of it is due to an incomplete understanding of these methods. Some dog books, even today, state that using food is morally wrong, that it "insults the dog's intelligence" and demeans the mystical bond between owner and dog. There would seem to be more to envy than to despise in the complex, reliable performances of intelligent whales and dolphins, trained using food as a positive reinforcer, especially since the training is achieved without the use of physical force. Other dog trainers have maintained that if you use food, the dog will not perform unless "bribed" with food, and you cannot feed the dog in the obedience ring. These trainers have not yet learned how to use the various schedules of reinforcement to intermittent or differential reinforcement. Once this is grasped, the dog's behavior can be strongly established and consistently maintained.

Do not hand your Irish Wolfhound's lead to a trainer to demonstrate a correction. Do not feel you have to do anything the trainer tells you if it is against your better judgement. I encourage you to go, without your hound, to obedience clinics or workshops given by successful dog trainers. Be wary of rigidity; not every technique will work for every animal. Go and observe critically (but quietly), keeping in mind the differences between Irish Wolfhounds and the other dogs the trainer may work with or understand. Your trusting Irish Wolfhound is a sensitive, loving, benign creature. It is sometimes difficult, especially for novices, to avoid being influenced by the pressure to compete or win in obedience trials. This competition pressure can lead people to behave in ways that are detrimental to the relationship between dog and owner (of course, this can happen in conformation showing or with any type of competition). Some training techniques are, in fact, abusive, and you would be embarrassed and saddened to have your hound even witness them.

Maureen Lucas, a sensitive and effective greyhound trainer, wrote, *"Incentive training is an excellent substitution for those of us who would no sooner hurt our dogs than our mothers ... No obedience goal could ever change the standards by which I train my dogs."*

Let your conscience be your guide. I find a good rule of thumb when evaluating a new technique is to try it out on a friend first. If you would not do something to a human acquaintance, ask yourself why you would be willing to do it to your very close canine friend. It is best to find a trainer to work with you and your Irish Wolfhound who understands the breed, knows how to use positive reinforcement and who either has worked well with other sighthounds or has had experience training a non-canid species using positive reinforcement. It is not surprising that dog trainers with extensive Irish Wolfhound experience are rare; all of the sighthounds together comprise less than 1% of all AKC registrations.

Even if you choose not to compete in obedience trials, working with your hound positively can be fun and beneficial to both of you. Some of the components that may be taught as part of the foundation for the obedience exercises can be helpful. A simple one that is fun is the "Watch Me" exercise. I use the hound's name said in a certain tone of voice rather than the words "watch me". This command means the hound should look into your eyes until given a release command. It is useful in teaching the dog to focus attention on the owner. House manners are certainly important in living with dogs as large as Irish Wolfhounds. They need a working vocabulary. Animals pick up both a verbal and non-verbal vocabulary through association, these shared meanings can enhance relationships because they permit more communication. One of the words that I use every day is "Wait" which means, when I open the door, wait until your name is called before you enter. this helps in keeping groups of hounds from crashing through open doors, bumping their hips against the doorway and each other. "Out of the kitchen" helps avoid congestion when it gets too crowded with people and hounds in my small kitchen.

Another command is "All done", which means, I have finished petting you so please leave me alone. "Off" means, do not touch this food I am trying to eat. I taught my first Irish Wolfhound to turn on the wall light switch with her nose, but she began doing it whenever she felt especially happy. The switchplate had noseprints all over it and she never turned the lights off; I wouldn't recommend teaching this. The hounds mill step into the bathtub when I say "Bath", and they know "Turn around" in the bathtub or when being groomed. Eliminating on command is very useful, as anyone who travels with dogs can attest. Mine also will stop panting and prick up their ears when I say "Listen", which is handy when you want them to stop panting so that the veterinarian can listen to their heart. I recently taught Chelsea a new command, "Flat", which is given after "Down", and means, assume right lateral recumbency with forelegs extended. She had to have several EKGs taken and I wanted her to be prepared. I then put "Chip Clips" on her elbows and stifles to simulate the electrode clips, and of course rewarding her for remaining relaxed and still. The veterinarians said she obeyed "Flat" for her radiographs too. I was glad I taught her this as I believe it made these veterinary procedures less stressful for her. Celeste Thaller added several more to this list; "Go on", which she says means, move away from me about two feet; "Jump in" means, get in the back of the car; and "Leave the cat alone" which means, Celeste advises, "Do not paw at, jump on, chase, push or torment the cat closest to you; or, stop pawing at, jumping on, chasing, pushing, and tormenting the cat closest to you".

Some words and phrases you say to your hound do not require a specific response but could be classified as informational or querying. Telling the hounds that Carl is home, or saying "Barbara's here" helps them learn the names of friends who are regular visitors. They can associate the name with the sound of the car. Your hounds' response to questions, such as "Do you want your dinner?" or "Do you want some clean water?" or "Do you want to go for a walk?" or "Do you want a biscuit?" helps them to communicate to you what they want. It seems considerate to teach them place or destination names, such as "To the barn", "Inside", "Outside", "Let's go sit on the deck" as well.

My hounds certainly know if I am going to leave the house, and whether I will be gone a short time (errands) or a longer time (behavior consultation), because they have learned the details of my pre-departure routine and to differentiate between "errand clothes" and "behavior clothes".

Obedience training affords an occasion to spend one-on-one dedicated time with your hound in a way that is interactional and that you both enjoy. It is a very good way to get to know your young hound better. It can give you both something constructive to do while you wait until your hound is mature enough to show in conformation. Cecilia Hoffinan found obedience as excellent way to appreciate her hounds' individuality. She writes:

At Charlie's last attempt for his CDX we showed outdoors on a rainy day. The current jump heights make me nervous, and I'm very glad the 1WCA voted to request that the height be lowered to shoulder level. On this day, I had waited until just before I had to go in the ring to decide whether I thought the footing was solid enough.

Charlie was working well and things looked promising until we hit the retrieve over the high jump ... when I threw the dumbbell, it landed and died. Not one inch of roll to it. Charlie went out with due enthusiasm, picked up the dumbbell, looked at the jump, decided he was too close and walked back around the jump. While technically he did not do as he was told, and many another trainer would have made an issue of his failure to properly complete the exercise, I felt Charlie had made a wise decision.

My dogs are trained to jump naturally and learn to pick the spot they need to take off from, at the speed they are travelling, by themselves. (Charlie knew he had landed on and was standing on his take-off spot, the grass was slick, and that he might not make it over the jump.) His failure to jump from a stand still under hazardous conditions, proves to me that he knew his own limitations, and was willing to work within them. To me, another proof of wolfhound intelligence ...

Then there's my newest hound, Ashley. Ashley was an adult when we got her and had never been away from home ... She's learned all of her obedience commands, though she still isn't able to string them together so that we can show. Part of her problem is that about two weeks before she comes in season, she starts disconnecting her brain and by the time she's truly in season she has her brain neatly stored on a shelf somewhere and she leaves it there for the next three months. Since she cycles every five months, we don't have a whole lot of time to learn things. I haven't despaired yet, though there have been times ...

Obedience classes were an amusing way for me to spend time with my older hound who had finished her championship and already had an obedience title. We went through a low-key Novice class again and she felt as superior as only an eight-year-old Irish Wolfhound bitch who is convinced she knows everything can feel. Being an instructor's dog was fun for her, too; she got to lie in the middle of the floor on a cushion while the commotion of a beginner's class swirled around her.

The old myth that an obedience trained dog will sit in the breed ring is still around, and no doubt someone will still be asking this question 100 years from now, no matter how often or how thoroughly it is debunked. Will obedience training cause your dog to sit in the breed ring? No. Learning and performing are context-dependent. You may use a different collar and lead in the breed ring, your motion and gait are different, and you will find your hound will rarely heel and sit unless given the specific command to do so. Training a dog involves putting behavior under stimulus control; that means you can tell the dog when to do it. You can give a command or signal counter to sitting, if you want to. You can say or signal, "stand". (And now my obedience trained hound will sit the next time in the breed ring, just to humble me!)

You and your hound will benefit in many ways from learning together positively. Whether your goal is formal obedience competition or simply to have a pleasant companion, careful application of these methods will help bring out the qualities of intelligence, devotion, and good manners that we all admire. As our methods become more suitable to our gentle friends, we may begin to see more Irish Wolfhounds and their owners happily competing in the obedience ring.

I think we all have the sense that our Irish Wolfhounds will do anything and everything we ask of them, if it is important to us. It is not important whether we choose to train for or to compete in formal obedience, or simply to enjoy our hounds as companions. We must try to live up to the standard of behavior our hounds have set for us and try to be worthy of them in all ways.

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