

Grooming an Irish Wolfhound for Show

Stripping an Irish Wolfhound's harsh coat is essential in preparing for the show ring.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I am showing my Irish Wolfhound and I am wondering how often I need to strip her coat. Her coat seems soft to me. Any suggestions?

A. With males standing 32 inches tall and females a couple of inches under that, these dogs are marvelous companions with a commanding presence. Coat care is pretty simple, but providing room for them to run and stretch out around the house is another matter. Because of their great size and the amount of exercise needed to keep them happy and healthy, the decision to bring an Irish Wolfhound into your life is a big one in more ways than one! Ideally, they should have a large fenced yard where they can gallop to their heart's content. After all, this largest of the sighthounds customarily took down wolves and elk in their native land.

As to dog show grooming, judges do favor the harsher-coated Irish Wolfhound, and according to the breed standard, a soft coat is considered a fault. However, some are shown with soft coats like the one you describe and do become finished champions because they have other qualities that compensate in the judge's eyes. Size, body structure, and gait also play a big part, so how well you do will be a matter of the judge's preference and your own preparation.

Since this imposing dog is most handsome in his natural state, show grooming is a subtle undertaking; he should only be neatened and shaped to follow his body's natural outline. Hand-stripping can coarsen a soft coat up a little, but I would consult with a breeder and view some Wolfhounds in the ring. You may also use a texturizing "terrier coat" shampoo and skip the conditioning rinse.

We use a wire slicker brush and a stainless steel comb to remove tangles and shed hair and we also "card" the coat with a tool like the FURminator, a fine-toothed stripping knife, or a #40 blade (not attached to the clipper) to remove soft undercoat and make the harsh outer coat lie more closely on the body. We hand strip to preserve texture and color as well, but only when the coat is ready to come out and the hair can be easily plucked. This is done with a gentle rhythmic motion, the wrist locked in place, pulling in the direction the hair grows. If the coat is ready to come out, it does not hurt the dog. Thinning shears or a stripping knife may also be used to subtly shape the underbelly and "ruff," the full collar that protected his ancestors when they tangled with wolves.

Raggedy hair outside the ears should be hand-stripped or thinned to reveal their shape. The hair over the eyes and under the chin is combed forward while the rest of the hair on the head is combed back and down to show the natural head shape. We neaten unruly head and cheek hairs with a stripping tool or thinning shears, which are also used to neaten the feet and eye corners. Most Irish Wolfhounds need a thorough brushing once a week but soft-coated dogs like yours may require more frequent brush work.

This dog was almost extinct in Ireland and Europe in the middle of the 19th century when Scottish breeder Captain George A. Graham gathered the remaining specimens and rehabilitated this ancient breed. The temperament of these gentle giants makes them a poor choice for watchdog or guard duties but their appearance alone is enough to deter intruders!