Irish Tails a-Waggin'

The Glen of Imaal Terrier

Written by Sam Schunk
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In celebrating St. Patrick's Day this month, it seemed only appropriate to shine the spotlight on one of the rarest canine breeds in the world, Ireland's Glen of Imaal Terrier. Among the nine types of dogs that are native to the Emerald Isle, this delightful, diminutive doggie is perhaps the least well-known of his canine compatriots, a group that includes instantly recognizable breeds such as Irish wolfhounds, red setters and terriers. The breed's moniker reflects its place of origin, the Glen of Imaal, a narrow valley found in Ireland's Wicklow Mountains, located south of Dublin. For this reason, it is also known as the Wicklow terrier or, more simply, the Glen.

A quick look at the statistics reveals that the Glen of Imaal is truly an uncommon canine. In the United States, living registered dogs of this breed number in the hundreds. The UK's Kennel Club, in tracking breeds where there are fewer than 300 puppies registered annually, has designated these dogs as a vulnerable native breed. According to the American Kennel Club (AKC), while the Glen has always existed in limited quantities, the species dwindled down to nearly nothing during World War II. However, thanks to the efforts of dedicated breeders, the Glen began to bounce back by the early 1970's…and U.S. enthusiasts began to take an interest in it during the following decade.

As a terrier, it's not surprising to note that the Glen of Imaal was initially bred to hunt small animals such as badgers, foxes and vermin. Since this breed is known for excelling at Earthdog tests, which involve hunting underground prey, it's clear that the Glen has retained this instinct to this day. Legend has it that Glen of Imaal terriers may have also assisted their owners with another important function: preparing meals. According to Irish lore, settlers in that region developed a turnspit that was connected to a device similar to a hamster wheel for cooking meat. By walking on this contraption, the dog's movement would cause the meat to turn over the fire. Only limited evidence supports this story, as the canines depicted in the 19th century engravings displaying this behavior bear little resemblance to the current-day Glen; however, it's not unusual for this to be included in breed descriptions or to hear dog show announcers mention it as part of their color commentary.

Known as a "big dog on short legs," the Glen of Imaal is a medium-size working terrier that reaches heights of about 12–14 inches at the withers, with weights averaging around 35 pounds for males and slightly less for females. Since the breed has three growth stages, it can take a Glen up to four years to reach full maturity. Looking at its body, it has a large head; short, slightly bowed legs; and sturdy, muscular shoulders, chest and hips. Along its back, the dog has a unique double coat that is wiry with a soft undercoat that typically continues on its head, sides and legs. Although there is much variation in how the hue is expressed, the Glen's coat colors are wheaten or blue, which often occurs with brindling, or streaks of other shades. As puppies, wheaten-colored youngsters may have black highlights in their fur, but these tend to disappear by the time they become adults.

Regarding temperament, Glen of Imaals are thought to be more easy going and even-tempered, as well as less vocal, than other terriers. Though they enjoy being active, they are equally content just resting by their owner's side. This dog is also noted for a posture known as the "Glen sit," in which the canine rests on its hind end, holding its entire body vertical, a stance not commonly seen in other breeds. While they do not tend to bark frequently, when they do, it is deep and authoritative, suggesting a much larger dog, which is why they have earned a reputation as a good watchdog. Glen enthusiasts report that these intelligent canines learn quickly, socialize easily, and are excellent with people, including children.

Happy tails!

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