

# **Irish Setters in the United States**

## **by Holly Kruse**

### **Table of Contents**

- \* Characteristics and Temperament
- \* Frequently Asked Questions
- \* Breed History
- \* Standard
- \* Special Medical Problems
- \* Resources

### **Characteristics and Temperament**

Many observers find Irish setters to be among the most beautiful of all dog breeds. Their dark red color, profuse feathering, and happy-go-lucky nature make them quite attractive to many dog lovers. However, Irish setters are not the dogs for everyone! They are very energetic dogs who require plenty of exercise, attention and affection.

Irish setters were originally bred to hunt upland game, and they are still proficient hunters. The breed today is essentially split into two varieties: the larger, darker, more heavily-coated dogs who come from conformation bloodlines, and the much smaller, lighter dogs descended from field trial lines, often called "Red Setters." With the institution of AKC Hunting Tests and the Irish Setter Club of America's Versatility Certificate program, many owners of non-field-bred Irish setters in the United States have been delighted to learn that their dogs still possess a strong hunting instinct.

Irish setters are among the largest of the sporting breeds, with males ideally measuring 27 inches at the withers and weighing about 70 pounds, and females measuring 25 inches at the withers and weighing about 60 pounds. The Irish setter is characterized by its "brick-on-brick" head and its silky coat, which is short on the body and longer on the chest, ears, backs of legs, tail, and undercarriage, and which ranges in color from chestnut to mahogany.

Although its potential is often not fully developed, the Irish setter is a very versatile breed. Not only are Irish setters beautiful companions and able hunters, they also possess the ability to excel at competitive obedience, tracking, and agility. There are several Irish setters with advanced obedience and agility titles.

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

"Are Irish setters high-strung and hyperactive?"

Irish setters are extremely active, energetic dogs, as are most sporting breeds. If they do not get adequate exercise and training, they can be difficult to live with. Their reputation as "hyper" dogs seems to have emerged when Irish setters became extremely popular in the 1970s. The combination of irresponsible breeding without selection for sound temperaments and placement in homes that were not up to the demands of an active sporting breed undoubtedly contributed to the perception that Irish setters are "hyper." With the decreased popularity of the breed in the 1980s and 1990s, the quality of the Irish setter temperaments being produced is uniformly much higher.

"Are Irish setters stupider than most other breeds?"

Anyone who has lived with them knows that these dogs are experts at getting their way! Irish setters present a training challenge because they can be soft, stubborn, easily distracted, and quick to bore, but most of them are quite intelligent. It takes a great deal of patience and commitment to train an Irish setter; however, such training is an absolute necessity, and it usually proves to be fun and rewarding for both dog and owner. Training must start early, and the trainer should keep in mind that most Irish setters aren't mentally mature until they are at least 2 years old.

"How much grooming does an Irish setter need?"

Their long feathering requires quite a bit of attention, otherwise it will quickly become matted. Daily brushing is the MINIMUM Irish setter grooming requirement.

"Would an Irish setter make a good guard dog?"

No. Many Irish setters will alert you to the presence of strangers on your property, but for the most part they are more likely to happily greet intruders (or to hide behind the sofa) than wrestle the family silver from burglars.

"Are Irish setters good with children?"

Yes, though since both Irish setters and children may have a tendency to play rough, interactions between them should be supervised.

"Because Irish setters are no longer near the top of the AKC popularity list, are they hard to find?"

Quality Irish setters from reputable breeders can be hard to find, so there is usually a wait for a puppy. Also, in some places the demand for older rescue dogs is far greater than the supply. Whether you are dealing with a breeder or a rescue representative, expect to be questioned thoroughly about your expectations and your ability to cope with the breed's maintenance demands. If you are not subject to such scrutiny, seek out another organization or breeder.

## **Breed History**

As with most of the sporting breeds that developed in the British Isles and Ireland, there is much speculation about the origins of the setter. The breed's formative years were in the eighteenth century, and the breed was clearly established by 1800. Its ancestry can be traced to a dog known as the setting spaniel, and crosses were undoubtedly made with Pointers, English setters, Gordon setters, and other spaniels. Some breed historians have suggested that early crosses were made with Bloodhounds, Irish water spaniels, and Irish terriers, though there is no documentation to support such conjecture.

Among setters in Ireland, red and white coloring was dominant well into the nineteenth century; even today many Irish setters are marked with small areas of white on the chest, neck, head, or between the toes despite the long-standing official division of Irish setters and Irish red and white setters (not AKC-recognized) into separate breeds. Nineteenth century descriptions of Irish setters with black or, more rarely, orange coloring or markings point to the probability of cross-breeding with English and Gordon setters.

Modern Irish setter type can be traced to a British dog of the 1870s named Ch. Palmerston. Palmerston has been described as large for his time – he weighed 64 pounds and measured 23.5 inches at the shoulder – with an unusually long and narrow head, heavy bone, and dark red coloring. Because of the impact of the few of Palmerston's daughters who were imported to the United States, there is little doubt that all American Irish setters can trace their ancestry to Palmerston.

During the first half of the twentieth century, there was very little difference in "type" between Irish setters who competed in field trials and Irish setters who competed in conformation competition. In recent decades, however, as field trial competitors sought to breed dogs that were competitive against other pointing breeds in field trials, and as conformation-minded breeders produced larger, heavily coated dogs that were more competitive in the show ring, the breed has split into two distinct types.

### **Special Medical Problems**

Irish setters are generally hearty dogs, often reaching 12 to 14 years of age; still, they are prone to health problems of varying degrees of severity:

#### **Gastric Dilatation-Volvulus (GDV)**

Often also called gastric torsion (or bloat, a misnomer, because in bloat without torsion the stomach does not rotate), GDV afflicts Irish setters more often than most other breeds. In this condition, the stomach twists and distends, acutely affecting key veins in the abdominal cavity and causing the failure of body systems. It should be noted that while GDV in Irish setters is sometimes accompanied by the classic symptoms of bloat, such as a distended abdomen and unproductive attempts to vomit, these symptoms are not always present, at least not in the earlier stages of GDV. Extreme restlessness is often the only observable symptom. Any Irish setter suspected of being in torsion should receive immediate veterinary attention, and Irish setter owners should not be shy about insisting on x-rays to ascertain a dog's condition. Furthermore, since traditional home methods of relieving bloat (such as passing a stomach tube or releasing trapped gas with a hypodermic needle) are not effective in cases of torsion, Irish setter owners are advised not to waste time trying such remedies when they suspect torsion; getting veterinary attention for dogs in torsion should be the top priority.

Precautions can be taken by Irish setter owners to lessen the likelihood that their dogs develop this acute and life-threatening condition. These precautions include 1) feeding two or more smaller meals per day rather than one large meal, 2) feeding a high quality diet, 3) mixing meat, vegetables, or canned food in with dry food, and 4) regulating the speed at which a dog eats.

GDV can be quickly fatal, but if caught in time a procedure called gastropexy, in which the stomach is surgically tacked to the abdominal wall or attached to a rib, can be performed. This surgery radically decreases the possibility of GDV recurrence. Extensive information about GDV can be found on the homepage of Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine at [http://www.crittersitextra.com/pettips/NEW\\_Purdue\\_Bloat\\_Study.pdf](http://www.crittersitextra.com/pettips/NEW_Purdue_Bloat_Study.pdf)

#### **Epilepsy**

Epilepsy is present in Irish setters. The Irish Setter Club of America has supported research to attempt to determine if there is a hereditary component to idiopathic epilepsy in Irish setters. With seizure disorders, and with all the conditions mentioned here, it is important that Irish setter puppy buyers ask breeders about the frequency of occurrence of such disorders in the pedigree. Visit <http://www.canine-epilepsy.net/> for more information.

### Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA)

PRA, a form of hereditary blindness, was once a serious problem in Irish setters. A DNA test, however, is now available through Optigen ([http://www.optigen.com/opt\\_page.taf?page=cladpra](http://www.optigen.com/opt_page.taf?page=cladpra)) to determine which Irish setters are PRA carriers and which are not. In Irish setters, PRA is a simple recessive and can therefore be eliminated from breeding programs by breeding known non-carriers to known non-carriers. Unlike some other forms of PRA, in Irish setters the condition –rod-cone dysplasia 1 – has an early onset; combined with the simple recessive nature of its inheritance, in the past the early onset of the disease enabled some Irish setter breeders to implement an effective, if controversial and not widely adopted, program of test-breeding to eliminate PRA from their breeding programs in the decades before the DNA test became available.

### Hypothyroidism

Hypothyroidism is relatively common in Irish setters. Symptoms may include lethargy, weight gain, and poor coat quality. The condition usually responds well to treatment with thyroid hormone. Proper diagnosis of low thyroid activity requires a thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) response test in addition to the standard T4 test. More information on thyroid testing and clearances is available at <http://www.offa.org/thyinfo.html>

### Hypertrophic Osteodystrophy (HOD)

HOD afflicts some Irish setter puppies (primarily between four and eight months of age) and is sometimes fatal. Symptoms can include fever, lethargy, swelling of joints, and lameness. Many veterinarians are not experienced in diagnosing and treating this condition, so it is important that puppy owners be aware of HOD's existence. Oversupplementation of puppies and high levels of protein in puppies' diets have been linked to the development of this condition. Read more at [http://www.irishsetterclub.org/Contents/Health\\_Committee/Revised HOD Paper.pdf](http://www.irishsetterclub.org/Contents/Health_Committee/Revised_HOD_Paper.pdf)

### Hip Dysplasia

Hip dysplasia, a malformation of the hip joint, is somewhat common in Irish setters. All breeding stock should be radiographically cleared of hip dysplasia by the Orthopedic Foundation of Animals – <http://www.offa.org/hipinfo.html> – or an equivalent national orthopedic registry before being bred.

### Osteosarcoma

Osteosarcoma, a type of bone cancer, may be on the rise in Irish setters. It commonly is found in the dog's limbs, although it may also be found in the shoulder, and secondary tumors may appear in the pelvis and other bone tissue, as well as the lungs. Most Irish setters who are affected develop the disease between seven and ten years of age. In some early cases, metastasis may be slowed by amputation of the affected limb and following with a course of chemotherapy. An academic overview of the disease can be read at <http://www.vet.uga.edu/vpp/clerk/Kramer/>

### Spondylosis, Arthritis, and Degenerative Myelopathy

Elderly Irish setters often develop spondylosis, an arthritic condition of the vertebrae that decreases mobility. This condition often responds well to treatment with Adequan or its oral forms (such as

Cosequin and Glycoflex), acupuncture, and/or anti-inflammatory drugs like Rimadyl, Etogesic, and Metacam. Caution should be used when giving dogs drugs like Rimadyl; read more on the Senior Dog Project's webpage: <http://www.srdogs.com/>. Spondylosis generally does not cause acute back pain or loss of sensation in the hindquarters (characterized by weakness, "knuckling" of hind feet, etc.). Spondylosis does tend to cause stiffness and loss of flexibility, but because it shows up dramatically in x-rays of many older, large dogs, unrelated symptoms may be attributed to it. In cases when hindquarter function is impaired, nervous system causes, like degenerative myelopathy (DM), should be investigated. Extensive information on DM useful for all though aimed at German shepherd dog owners, can be found on the website of the University of Florida, where Dr. Roger Clemmons, foremost researcher on DM, is on the faculty: [http://neuro.vetmed.ufl.edu/neuro/DM\\_Web/DMofGS.htm](http://neuro.vetmed.ufl.edu/neuro/DM_Web/DMofGS.htm)

### **Less Common Conditions**

#### **Canine Leukocyte Adhesion Deficiency (CLAD)**

CLAD is a rare but hereditary immune system disorder that causes death in puppies, usually from multiple infections. It is mainly known in Irish setters in Europe but may be present in some North American dogs. A test is available that identifies dogs who are free of the recessive gene that carries CLAD ([http://www.optigen.com/opt\\_page.taf?page=cladpra#clad](http://www.optigen.com/opt_page.taf?page=cladpra#clad)).

#### **Persistent Ductus Arteriosus (PDA)**

PDA is a cardiac disease: in dogs, it is the most common congenital heart defect. In PDA, a channel found in normal in utero puppies through which blood leaving the heart is allowed to bypass the lungs fails to close as it should soon after birth. As a result, the puppy's heart has to work very hard to maintain a normal blood flow, and if untreated, PDA is likely to lead to congestive heart failure in young dogs. Information on PDA is available from the Canine Inherited Disorders Database (Canada) at: [http://www.upei.ca/~cidd/Diseases/cardiovascular\\_diseases/PDA.htm](http://www.upei.ca/~cidd/Diseases/cardiovascular_diseases/PDA.htm)

#### **Von Willebrand's Disease (vWD)**

This hereditary bleeding disorder, somewhat widespread in Doberman pinschers, has been found in a few Irish setters. vWD, is characterized by a deficiency in a factor that enables platelets to adhere to the walls of blood vessels and each other to the blood vessel wall and to each other. The ability of blood to clot is impaired, which leads to excessive bleeding. A test is available to learn if one's dog is affected. Find out more from this document from Seattle Veterinary Associates: [http://www.seattleveterinaryassociates.com/von\\_willebrand's.htm](http://www.seattleveterinaryassociates.com/von_willebrand's.htm)

### **Online Resources**

The homepage of the Irish Setter Club of America, including information on breeders, rescue, and events, is at:

<http://www.irishsetterclub.org>

The address of the National Red Setter Field Trial Club's homepage is:

<http://www.nrsftc.com/>

The American breed standard and links to Irish setter resources are available on the AKC's homepage [http://www.akc.org/breeds/irish\\_setter/index.cfm](http://www.akc.org/breeds/irish_setter/index.cfm)

Setters-L is a mailing list for setter owners and fanciers. To join, send an email message containing only the text:

SUBSCRIBE SETTERS-L Yourfirstname Yourlastname

To [listserv@apple.ease.lsoft.com](mailto:listserv@apple.ease.lsoft.com). To subscribe through the list's WWW interface, go to:

<http://apple.ease.lsoft.com/archives/setters-l.html>

This list covers all setter breeds.

### **Print Resources**

The Irish Setter Club of America Memo to Members. Periodical. See <http://www.irishsetterclub.org>

Brearley, Joan McDonald. This is the Irish Setter, T.F.H. Publications, 1975.

Eldredge, E. Irving, and Connie Vanacore, The New Complete Irish Setter, Howell Book House, 1983.

Gallagher, Patricia. Irish Setters Today. Tentagel, Inc., 1977.

Gardner, Eve. Irish Setters Today. Howell Book House, 1998.

Holvenstot, Luz. Irish Setters. T.F.H. Publications, 1979.

Hutchinson, Walter. Hutchinson on Setters, Donald R. Hoflin Publishing, 1980.

Johns, Rowland. Our Friend the Irish Setter. E. P. Dutton & Co., 1933.

Thompson, William C. The New Irish Setter. Howell Book House, 1968.

Vanacore, Connie. The Official Book of the Irish Setter. T.F.H. Publications, 2001.