

*'Give me the boy at 7 years  
and I'll give you the man  
... give me the pup at 4 months  
and I'll give you the dog.'*  
— a canine take on the classical  
Jesuit adage

My best mate, Hercules.

## Preface

There are two contrasting stories that are at the very heart of this book: a story of possibility, love and success, and another of missed opportunity, lack of knowledge and desperate tragedy. Both broke my heart in different ways. The former through true love and the grief of losing a very special friend, the latter through the deep despair of not being able to save all of those dogs who don't get the right start in life. While these stories are based on true experiences, some of the names have been changed.

These stories illustrate what an extraordinary life a dog can lead when given an educated start, and how awful it can be when we don't get it right. In the end, what both of these stories truly show is just how significant — no, critical — the formative period of a puppy's life (3-16 weeks of age) is, and how 'doing the right thing at the right time' makes all of the difference. The sage advice that 'Prevention is better than cure' definitely holds true here.

### HERCULES THE STAR: THE BEST BEGINNING AND THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

My relationship with Hercules, my handsome Huntaway-Rottweiler cross, is undoubtedly one of my most defining and heartfelt relationships with a dog. He bonded with me in such a deep and meaningful way, and our shared language was subtle and sophisticated. With nearly 150 commands and shared words, Hercules could discriminate hundreds of items, from toys to household items to movie props. He could get a beer out of the fridge, and when he'd visit me in the bath he'd close the bathroom door behind him. He was a great mate.

Hercules was best known for his prowess as an actor, with hundreds of commercials and movies to his name. The famous Toyota 'Bugger' advertisement won 15 international awards and he became Australian

Charles — so much potential.



Dog of the Year. Even as I write this, I see one of our national newspapers referencing that ad and Hercules 20 years on. It seems he wasn't only my dog — the whole nation fell in love with him, too!

He began life with my son Bodhi and me when we chose him to be the pup for the TV show *Hercules*. The noisy, complex environment of a film set, and learning to perform many behaviours in a very short time, is challenging for a pup, so it was critical we got Hercules at the right time: the start of his formative period after leaving his mother (7 to 8 weeks old).

Hercules' ongoing ability to learn and to adapt to new situations was profound, because he had 'learned to learn' at the right time, when he was soaking up new information like a sponge. More than his ability to learn and achieve great things was the deep and subtle bond that my family and I developed with Hercules as he grew. It was extraordinary the way I knew he kept an eye out for the kids, even pulling my youngest, Koan, away from the pool edge by his nappies when Koan had managed to escape my notice. I was amazed and grateful for another pair of eyes; he was such a significant member of our family.

How sad I was when he died, a true hero's death — educating children in the middle of a film set. Thirteen years old and in full stretch, he dropped dead of a heart attack — no warning, so unexpected. The national newspaper ran a full, blacked-out page with just a simple phrase in the centre — 'Bugger!'; and the TV news ran a story of farewell for him while playing Sting's 'Fields of Gold'. To this day that song makes me cry, good tears honouring a life well lived and with gratitude for having had such a good mate.

Although he had an extraordinary life, there wasn't anything innately special about Hercules: he just had the right start, which created a very special bond, and was a dog capable of learning and coping with life's complexities. His story is one of possibility: you, too, can create such a deep bond with your dog if you do the right thing at the right time with your pup.

### CHARLES THE WEIMARANER: GONE WRONG SO EARLY

Charles's story is much sadder and more difficult, needlessly going down a tragic path. It is not an easy story for me and my team to tell,

but we know people need to understand just how critical the formative period of a puppy's life is, and what the consequences can be without the right start for a pup. Over 40 years of seeing thousands of these cases makes the grief even greater.

Charles was a handsome, pure-bred Weimaraner, young, full of vitality and very close to his family. He bounced into Jane and Lex's lives at 12 weeks old, later than the ideal 8 weeks old, and just within the formative period. He was the centre of their lives. They hadn't yet had children, although they were planning for them in the near future.

Unfortunately, they were advised to keep him under a strict at-home regime until his vaccination programme was completed. This resulted in Charles not leaving their property until he was 4 months old, meaning that as a young pup in the critical formative period he had led a far too limited life. He had met very few dogs and people, and had not been exposed to much novelty and change. Research shows that if pups don't have much or any socialisation by 12 weeks of age, they will most likely be mal-socialised (not socialised to your extended social group) later in life, as was the case with Charles.

Early on, Lex and Jane had noticed the odd growl from their pup, and they had trouble with him growling and snapping when they tried to get him off the bed or tell him off. This problem continued to escalate over the months, until finally Charles bit his beloved owners several times. By 18 months old a further problem started manifesting: a wariness of strangers, both at home and elsewhere. By the time he was 2 years old, a complaint had been made to the council that Charles had bitten someone, so the family ended up at my clinic.

When I met Charles, and with a baby about to join their family, his fear-induced protective aggression and dominance aggression were already well established. Dominance aggression is one of the 10 different forms of aggression we treat in our clinic. It is characterised as aggression primarily towards family members, and can be very distressing and frightening. It indicates a malformed bond, where a dog is competing aggressively for resources with other members of the family. (Most often this is directed at those the dog perceives to be the more subordinate family members, but it can extend to all family members, as in this case.) His protective aggression made Charles wary of strangers, due to his not knowing how to meet and greet people. He started barking at and threatening visitors, although

when you watched him you could tell it was fear-induced, and only got more offensive (direct) as his ability to displace people was rewarded by their retreating.

He was a challenging case in clinic, but after our standard 3-week residential stay he had all of the training tools and techniques established. We were happy that, if the owners could follow through effectively, things should go well at home. We transferred this work to the home and the owners, and for the first few months things went well. Unfortunately, it didn't last, and Charles started to revert to his old ways. With such difficult cases, the long-term prognosis relies heavily on the owners' ability to follow through effectively and consistently with complex techniques, which can be challenging even with the best of intentions.

Over the next couple of years, we would visit and try to support the family to settle things back down. It was a long and painful couple of years, and ultimately we discussed and recommended euthanasia, as the risks were rising with their son now becoming a toddler. They couldn't bring themselves to do this, so we all battled on, trying to make it work. Can you imagine the internal conflict within this family as they sought to protect their beloved son, their beloved dog and themselves? We felt for them dearly.

Eventually, the call came. He had threatened their toddler a number of times. They had tried re-homing (even though we hadn't recommended this), and each time he was returned for either threatening or biting his new owners. They brought him back to us to assess, and after some incidents with my highly experienced team we knew he wasn't a dog that could safely go to any home.

It is a brutal part of our work. After working with Charles for so long, we had become very attached. Yet part of our role is to help a family make difficult decisions, weighing up the impact on the dog and the family, as well as risks to the community. It isn't easy, and I don't wish it on anyone. We didn't have the resources to have him stay with us (which ones do you save?), and we knew he wasn't safe in the community, so we had to support the family to humanely euthanise him.

We held them as close as we could, had Charles on our property for a play-filled final week, and supported him as we lay him to rest in a sunny spot by our river with a ritual of care and love. How deeply we wished it could have been different for him, and it could have been