

ABOUT *the* AUTHOR

(IN HIS OWN WORDS)

My professional career in animal nutrition, breeding, and training has an interesting genesis. In 1979 I was teaching high school physics and environmental science classes, but as the days passed, I knew I needed to supplement my meager teacher's salary of \$12,000 a year to support my family of four. I decided to operate a part-time landscaping and lawn maintenance business. My days were long. Sometimes I worked twelve to fourteen hours a day (depending on the time of year) at my various jobs. Moreover, as my years of teaching in an inner-city school accumulated, I began to desire a career change. Early in my teaching career, I remember thinking that upon retiring after thirty-five years in education I would—with luck—perhaps open up a small business. I wanted a small town atmosphere and community that would support such a venture. Eventually, I decided on the town of Thomaston, Connecticut.

Then, in April 1988, Lady Luck visited me.

Safari Club International selected me as its Teacher of the Year in Connecticut, and as part of the award I had the opportunity to travel to the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone National Park. So it was that while hiking in the Grand Tetons in Wyoming on that exceptional two-week field course my obsession with animal nutrition began. As one of twenty-eight teachers selected from around the country to study the various habits of bears, coyotes, elk, moose, and mountain lions in Yellowstone, I knew I was having the experience of a lifetime. I decided then and there to leave the teaching profession as soon as it was financially possible to do so, to continue my education in nutrition, and to start a dog and cat food business. After returning to Connecticut with my new calling, I was fortunate to find an eight-hundred-square-foot store in Thomaston called the Outpost Supply, the same building where the Thomaston Feed & Supply, the local feed store, had been located since the early 1900s. There I opened my business as we entered the '90s. (And the addition of chocolate Lab Drake to our household was all I needed to round out my obsession.)

The early days were very trying times. For example, the business might take in only fifty dollars a day in sales. Then misfortune struck in January 1996, when the store suffered a devastating fire that nearly closed down the business. I endured, though, running the business out of two forty-foot storage trailers. Nighttime business hours at the store were the most trying, however; I had to use flashlights for lighting and a ceramic heater to keep my Labs and me warm through the cold winter nights.

Nevertheless, in 1997, after eighteen years of teaching, I decided to leave that profession and devote my energies full-time to the business, the family, and the five Labs we owned: Drake, Jess, Slate, Cider, and Dash. My wife and young sons helped me rebuild the business, along with my nephew Brian and my sister-in-law, Vicki. In 1998 I changed the business name to Thomaston Feed (I had named it Thomaston Feed and Grain in 1995 out of respect for its heritage in the town). With my family's help and under the influence of six more Labs—eleven in all—we were truly a family-run business!

As the years passed, the business grew and managing it became easier. I lost seven of the original eleven Labradors, most to age, a few to unfortunate accidents. The death of one's dogs is always difficult and poignant, but there's nothing like a new puppy to help one forget the losses. Thus it was that in September 2007 my friend and confidant Peter Rothing of Diamond R Kennels in Belgrade, Montana, sent me my then newest Lab, Ruger. Thankfully, I was fortunate to have Drake and Ruger at the same—though very short—time. Drake was seventeen years old and suffering from acute heart failure. It was obviously time to let him go. He died on September 18, 2007, just five days after Ruger entered my life. I see many of Drake's traits in Ruger; my wife, Roxanne, and I believe Drake's spirit lives on in him. That renews my strength and interest in breeding and training these wonderful dogs. As further evidence of this, we have recently added a Lab puppy, Gunner, to our family. Western-bred (and yet another gift from Peter Rothing), Gunner is the first yellow male I have ever owned. These incredible animals have inspired and motivated me to write this book.

I hope that as you read through this book you recognize that outstanding nutrition is the foundation of your dog's health. Granted, it does not negate the importance of vet visits, but it does help limit them. Nutrition, therefore, should be a priority of each and every dog and cat owner. For it is up to us to provide the very best care we can find and afford for these incredible animals. As Dr. Albert Schweitzer once said, "A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help."