

# Benson trained for fame

He, dogs made splash at Sentinel's first Sports Show

By REID J. EPSTEIN

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It was in a downtown Milwaukee bar in 1938 that Orin Benson and two Milwaukee Sentinel promotions men dreamed up a sports show for Milwaukee.

A Benson-trained retriever pup, owned by Sentinel promotions man G. Sumner Collins, won grand champion at the Chicago Sportsman's Show, and the three men went to the Plankinton Bar to celebrate and plan a show of their own.

"It was on the ride home that we first started talking about the Sentinel getting behind a Milwaukee show," Benson said before the 2005 show.

Benson, who trained thousands of dogs during a 70-year career, died Saturday at his home in the Town of Ottawa, in western Waukesha County. He was 91.

Born April 15, 1914, in White Bear Lake, Minn., Orin Clark Benson traveled from coast to coast with his dogs. From his ken-

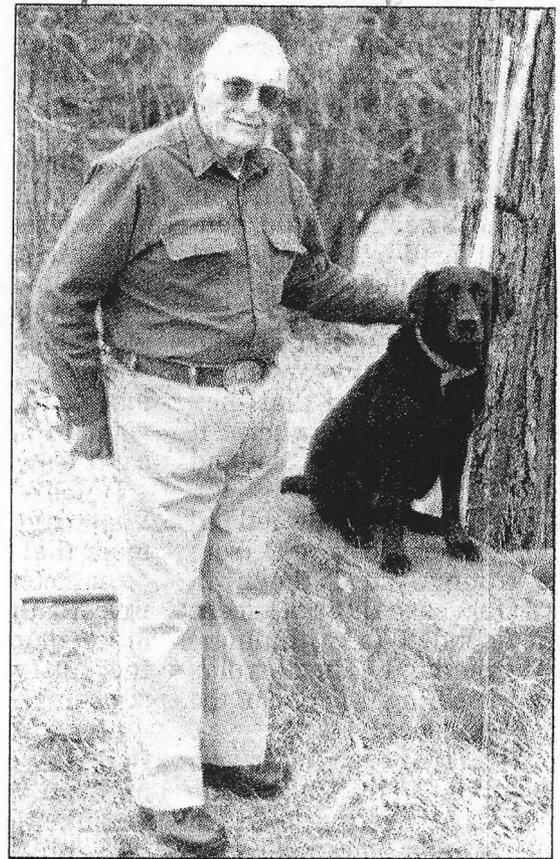
nel, he trained dogs and became friends with the likes of Roy Rogers, Gene Autry and Prince Philip of England.

It was the 1940 launch of the Milwaukee Sentinel Sports Show, with Benson's dog tank show as the main attraction, that made him famous. For five decades, hundreds of thousands of people would flock to the show to watch the logrollers and duck hunters. Now the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Sports Show, the event draws more than 150,000 people annually to a 10-day run at Wisconsin State Fair Park.

"Orin Benson set the standard for dog training demonstrations in a public forum," said Charlie Potter, the president of Great Outdoors, the management company that now operates the sports show. "His main stage act at the Sentinel Sports Show was known literally throughout the world and was admired by everybody in the profession."

Elected to the Sports Show Hall of Fame

Please see **BENSON, 9B**



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Orin Benson poses with Sadie, a client's black Labrador retriever, in 2000.

## Sports Show hall of famer known for tank show

BENSON, From 1B

in 2000, Benson was a consummate entertainer. During one routine, he sent his retrievers after birds. With a blow of Benson's whistle, the dogs sat still at the edge of the tank while a dachshund popped from a suitcase to pick up the birds.

"The obedience of dogs and the training of dogs that he would demonstrate was just spectacular," Potter said. "Their instincts, the way they reacted to him, it was like a ballet."

Benson once said his dog shows were so popular because he used several different breeds. That way, he said in a 2000 interview, everyone could relate to the dogs.

"People liked that because, chances are, somebody in the audience would have a dog like the ones I had," he said.

When he wasn't with his dogs, Benson's sharp sense of humor and spot-on aim with a slingshot would regularly cause trouble in restaurants and bars, according to a longtime friend, Bill Cullerton.

"He would take peas in a slingshot, and if a guy was sitting at a bar, he'd hit him in the rear end," said Cullerton, who met Benson in the 1940s at a Chicago sports show and lives in Oak Brook, Ill. "The guy would turn around and look and look and never saw who did it."

With or without his dogs, Benson was a consummate outdoorsman. During the 10 days of

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the sports show, he would sometimes pull all-nighters fishing with his buddies in between spending all day at the show.

"If the season was right and the walleye were running on the Wolf River, we would close the show at 11 o'clock, get a couple of cases of beer and catch walleye all night," Cullerton said. "We'd cook 'em there, eat breakfast, come back and open the show at 9 or 10 in the morning."

Benson was preceded in death by his first wife, Lucille, his second wife, Vivian, his son, Robert, and his brothers. He is survived by his sister, Mabel Smiley of California, and his daughter, Lynn Marie Benson.

A service for Benson has not yet been scheduled. Memorials for an Orin Benson trust may be sent to First Oconomowoc Bank, 155 W. Wisconsin Ave., Oconomowoc, WI 53066.

Mil J. S. July 15-2005